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WITH YOU, RIGHT THROUGH

on 15 October, 2018

BECKY

" Would you know, O curious Ben,
What true women want in men?
Only titles that are won
By some act that they have done,
Only manners that impart
Knowledge of their source—the heart."

Pearson's Colonial Library

BECKY

BY

HELEN MATHERS
AUTHOR OF
"SAM WILDFIRE" AND "COMIN' THRO' THE RYE"

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TO

THE MEMORY OF

MY BROTHER WALTER

PIONEER AND EXPLORER

BECKY

CHAPTER I

"Courage, sir, which makes a man or woman look his goodliest."

BECKY turned impatiently away from the window, and looked disparagingly round the green drawing-rooms, dim as faded woodlands in the blur of a premature winter fog.

"A life of four walls, where you spend half your time in talking about other people, and the moment your back is turned, they talk about *you!*"

"I'm rather fed up on being a woman," said Becky, talking aloud to herself, as she often did, but still with that odd feeling which had possessed her lately, that change was waiting for her round the corner. "What I would give to be a *man*, and wear breeches, and walk into a public-house, and drink a glass of beer if I wanted one—that's real independence. Women mayn't do anything."

She stopped to listen to sounds of a fray apparently proceeding on the staircase, and almost immediately the door bounced open, and a working-man, who gripped a footman by his coat collar, fell head foremost with him into the room.

The next moment, one of the men was outside the door, and the other advancing with outstretched hands towards the girl who involuntarily retreated before him, apparently as much displeased by unorthodox, as by respectable conduct.

"Becky!"

"*Walter!*"

And with a scream of recognition from the girl they rushed headlong into one another's arms.

"When did you come? Why didn't you write?" cried Becky, when at last she got away from the dingy flannel shirt, the soiled coat, and stood back to recognise as old friends those colossal boots laced up with twine that were indigenous to Walter, since no man ever knew their maker, or met their fellows here upon earth. Seven-leagued boots were they, that apparently enabled him to take a look in at any part of the earth he fancied, for he had walked in just as casually, after they had all supposed him killed at Isandhlwana; and, to judge by appearances, he was no better off now than then—if anything, rather worse.

"I've found a fortune," he said, with a rich chuckle and shake, and heave of the shoulders peculiar to him. "It's guano—and, Becky, it'll pan out *rich!*"

Becky wrinkled up her nose, as if something offended it, then opened her eyes and ears for information, for she had heard nothing, knew nothing, of the matter in hand, as Walter did not shine as a correspondent.

"I thought you were sealing," she said, as Walter, catching sight of himself in a mirror, walked up to it,

and took a dispassionate view of himself, from his bullet head, so closely singed as to suggest Colney Hatch, downwards over his whole outer casing, which was so rough and disreputable as positively to attain distinction.

Inside those soiled duds was a man—clean, primitive, hard as nails, supple as steel, pioneer, explorer, with a lion's heart that did not know what fear was, and a character that had all the noble simplicity, if some of the faults, of a child that had grown up, but would never grow old.

"Ugly, undersized devils we all are!" he said, looking at himself with intense disgust. "Who would ever think you girls could be our sisters? Well, we must wire to the glorious old mother to come up. I should have gone to her straight, but knew Jane Pomeroy would have all the news, so came to her first—and it's a piece of luck finding you here, Becky," he added, giving her another hug.

"Mother's all right at Lavenders," said Becky, "how rejoiced she'll be! She is probably sitting at this moment with the Family Bible before her, in which her twelve children's names are inscribed, and into which she has copied all your noble deeds—you know she loves every one of her children—but it is capital letters for her boys, and small print for the girls, every one!"

Walter had deposited his battered felt hat on a chair, and now he thoughtfully seated himself on the extreme edge of a satin couch, and remarked that he was thirsty, and longing for lager beer.

"Give me a drink," said he, "and then I'll spin you a yarn that'll make you sit up. In a big jug, mind," he

added, with a ferocious scowl at the servant who presently received the order, for had not the man tried to bar the way to him just now? His kindly soul revolted at the petty civilisation that judges a man, not by what he is, but by what he wears; not by his inborn qualities of heart and mind, but by the paint and feathers with which fate, or luck, or his forefathers have tricked him handsomely out.

"Jane Pomeroy is in Paris buying frocks," said Becky. "Quekett told her she really was a disgrace to the furniture, and marched her off—but I believe he has some racing on, and is frying his own fish. I'm keeping house for her. When the missus comes, we'll have a real good time here together."

"I want to get warm," he said; "can't we go down to Mrs. Quekett? I've got a touch of malaria upon me, and would like to sit right into a fire."

"Come and sit into this one," said Becky, but the boy looked at the carved, high chimney-piece, at the simplicity of the flowers in lapis lazuli jars above it, and shivered visibly; it was comfort he wanted, not beauty.

His face cleared, however, as the servant brought in a jug about two feet high, and in the fascination of gazing at Walter's caravan boots, nearly set it on the floor instead of a table, where it looked as much out of place in its surroundings as a self-respecting jug could.

"That man wants kicking," cried Becky in a rage when the man had departed, with the elegant vision of Walter in his dingy shirt-sleeves impressed on the delicate retina of his eye, and Walter looked after him with a

ferocious scowl, for, if a lamb when pleased, he was apt to ask any one who affronted him "to come out and have a *quiet* talk with him round the corner," a talk that usually ended to his own complete satisfaction.

"That's good," he said, when he had taken a good drink with that satisfaction which only a dweller in waterless Africa can know, and Becky, out of pure sympathy, almost felt that she was enjoying it too.

"And how are the noble unemployed?" he inquired with a broad grin as he lit his pipe.

"First rate! Billygoat spends his time between the hospital, and fetching the money the missus sends him. It was such a joke! He didn't write once for months, so mother wrote to the post-office to inquire, and found he'd fetched his screw regularly!"

"And Mort?"

"He's had influenza sixteen times," said Becky, her eyes dancing, "and a doctor every time! And of course the missus pays this—besides his allowance. And *you* have never had a penny!"

"And do you think I'd have taken it?" cried Walter indignantly.

Then they talked family affairs. But this is not the book of the Bethunes, only some part of the life of two of them, else their ups and downs, the striking vicissitudes and splendours of their lot, would make brilliant reading, and it is somewhat rough on the others, who were much more interesting, that Becky and Walter should so far be the only ones to have a story all to themselves.

"Whose house is shaken by the will of Heaven, woe

never leaves it, falling upon generation after generation," quoted Becky gloomily. "I often wonder what *I* am saving up for, but there have been so many misfortunes in our family that at last it's like a play; when the stage is littered with corpses, and they are swept out in dozens, you feel inclined to laugh—for levity is own daughter to tragedy."

She stopped abruptly, for what did that poor boy know of such fine distinctions? Tragedy exists solely in the imagination, and comedy in the intellect, and Walter, as elemental man, who knew hunger and thirst, and peril and pain, took life and death simply, and did not dream of calling tragic (as we civilised people do) the inevitable accidents of existence, and the certainty, sooner or later, of its extinction.

"Becky," he said, putting a scarred hand on her shoulder, "if only the poor old Gov. had lived to see it!" He gulped something down, and tried to light a pipe that was already lit.

"Yes, poor papa!" said Becky softly. "What tormenting little devils we were! No wonder we made him angry. It doesn't bear thinking about," she added resolutely, for, indeed, there had been cruel tragedies in their family, and time alone could tell what others were in store.

But Walter must perforce remember; his face was sad, and he had forgotten the golden present in the past.

"When I came home last time, I knew I'd never see him again," he said, "but the spirit was there just the same; nothing could break that."

"The guano," cried Becky, determined to be cheerful; "the guano's the thing! The where—the how—the when!"

"Well," said Walter, reluctantly leaving the family affairs for his own adventures, "you know, after the fighting was over, I went up country for the German Government looking for seals——"

"Of course I didn't know, as you never wrote."

"Getting five pounds a month," proceeded Walter, who was not to be distracted by a feminine rush of words; "and at Cape Town, one day, a Hottentot came and told me a lot of seals had been seen up Cape Cross way. Well, everybody said I was a fool, and it was certain death to cross the desert, for no white man—or black either—had got across it. But I slung some water-bottles over my back, took my gun, and half-a-dozen cartridges, and one Hottentot, and went."

"Well, Becky," he paused, and across his eyes a whole panorama seemed to flit. "We *got* there, and seals there were in plenty on the headland at Cape Bay (but that's another yarn), and inland was something else—an immense salt-pan, upon which were about thirty islands—all loaded with guano; the ammonia burnt our legs when we walked about on it. I knew the stuff well enough; the Germans scrape some islands belonging to them once a year," and here Walter lifted the big jug again, as if its contents were worth more than money, and considerably more to his taste.

Becky closed her eyes, and—for she was very imaginative—thought of the pride that must have swollen

that manly and ragged bosom (though he neither then nor after said anything about it), when, with one faithful blackie beside him, he gazed abroad, and saw enormous wealth spread out before him—before him, the poor, the often hungry—and remembered those at home whom he could help with lavish generosity. He wanted so little for himself, so much for other people, his heart was big enough to embrace the whole world, and his hand, however full, could never keep pace with it.

"Well, Becky," continued Walter, "it puzzled me for a bit how these islands had come to be overlooked; people had been hunting for 'em up and down the coast thousands of years, as I'd often heard—for they'd been there ever since the world began—yet no living soul but that Hottentot and I had ever set foot on them before, for this reason. From the sea the islands were invisible, a natural sand-bar, ten miles in length, twenty feet high, and fifty yards wide, had cut off Sierra Bay, and formed a large salt-pan, or tract of land reclaimed from the sea, through which at extraordinarily high tides the water percolated, so that some of the islands are surrounded by water, and some become peninsular. Well, you see, Becky, the only way to find it was to go across the desert, and all the others got sick of it, and stuck at Omoruru, eighty miles off it; beyond that there is no water. Once," he paused, "I got out my clasp-knife to open a vein, but I put it back, and we stumbled on somehow till we got to Omoruru. It was brackish stuff, Becky, but the sweetest liquor I ever tasted in my life."

"The English never turn back!" cried Becky, with

a warm colour in her face; "they may have to crawl on their hands and knees, but somehow or other, drunk or sober, they arrive. Well," she pushed back her hair, and began to dance—"you boys have been a long while making a push, but one of you has done it at last, and beaten us girls clean out of the field."

She had built, demolished, and rebuilt various castles in the air while Walter was speaking—a homely Pactolus who had power to make the arid family garden blossom like the rose.

"How far is it to walk?" she said.

"A thousand miles from Cape Town."

"What are these islands like?" she next inquired with deep interest.

"Well" (Walter really pronounced the word 'wal'), "they are different sizes, and look like low hills; they are covered on top to a depth of three inches with caked salt, and they vary in depth from three to eighteen feet."

Becky's eyes widened. How many new frocks, luxuries of all kinds, and keen enjoyments of travel, did not those low-lying mounds represent to her mind's eye!

"It's the biggest find of guano since Peru," said Walter meditatively; "and there it's been lying these thousands of years waiting for some beggar to find it, for it was known that some such place existed."

He stopped to chuckle with huge mirth.

"We found the brandy bottles and litter of those who had been looking for it all along the way, but it was the want of water that stuck them; they'll have to condense every drop when they fix up the settlement."

"And what will *you* do there?" said Becky faintly, for she had executed many somersaults of hope and fear during the past half-hour. The more humanity you have, the more money you want, and Becky was a natural spendthrift, but more on others than herself.

"I shall look after the sealing," said Walter eagerly, for the love of work was keen in him, "it's rough work, and the sealers are rough chaps, who won't obey any one who isn't as rough as themselves, and who does not know his work as well as they do. Lord, those seal islands are worth a lot of money; we ought to kill our two hundred a day, though it's cruel work," he added, shaking his head.

Becky thought perhaps it was crueller to have to wear a sealskin with out-of-date sleeves, while her brother counted them lightly by the hundred. Then she said with a sigh of extreme bliss, "How lovely it will be to be rich again. After all the money we have had, and lost, has some really come to stay?"

"Softly," said Walter, "the guano ain't mine, you know. *I've* got no money to run the shop—it's my pal's."

Becky's jaw dropped; her war-dance stopped. "You won't be rich—you won't have *any* of it?" she said.

"Well, you see," said Walter, leaning uneasily against the soft cushions (he would infinitely have preferred the floor, or better still, mother earth), "the islands are on territory which ought to be ours, and would have been, if Granville had done what Bartle Frere wanted; but he didn't, and so Germany cut in with her flag,

and our goose was cooked—and you don't s'pose they'd grant a concession to me?" He took a brief glance at the mirror handy, and twitched a humorous nose. "I *did* write 'em."

Becky smiled, for Walter's laborious round hand would have disgraced a Board School child of ten. Somehow, when they stuffed him as a boy with Greek and Latin, orthography and penmanship were quite left out of the programme.

"And actually they never even condescended to answer! And if I'd told anybody at Cape Town, they would have been on it before you could say knife! Though I'm afraid I partly gave it away," he added ruefully, "when I was a bit on, you know, but not enough for any one to find it on their own hook; and I wrote home to a friend, but he did not tumble to it; and then I wrote to a chap who once did me a good turn, and I gave him the latitude and longitude of the islands, and the amount of territory for which he must apply at Berlin for a concession. Within twenty-four hours of getting it, he cabled to me to come back; and at Southampton I got a wire to say he had gone to Berlin, and expected to be home to-night."

"On your bare word!" cried out Becky proudly. "Walter, it's something to have a character like that! But supposing he doesn't get the concession?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders. Money, except to give away, was of little use to this vagabond, ever wandering, yet ever at home, in the great green caravansera of God, and who, living ever face to face with

Nature's great elemental truths, could with Stevenson cry from his heart:

"Give to me the life I love,
Let the lane go by me;
Give the jolly heaven above,
And the byway nigh me.

Bed in the bush, with stars to see;
Bread I dip in the river;
There's the life for a man like me,
There's the life for ever."

Health was everything, gold nothing in the primitive life he lived; health and that spirit of adventure which was the very breath of his nostrils, the fortune itself being but a small matter, the exploring and the peril of it constituting its biggest charm.

"We shall know soon," he said, and hid his face once more in the jug.

"And pray," said Becky, "what are *you* going to have out of it?" And yet she almost felt the question an insult to the noble-minded, hodden-clad, primæval man before her.

"Oh, my pal will look after *my* interests!" he said largely, and Becky sighed, and got up, and kissed this child of Nature, this Israelite without guile, on the top of his shorn head, and forbore to tell him that his behaviour might be magnificent, but certainly was not business.

"Somehow," she said wistfully, "there's always blood on the treasure that comes out of the Dark Continent, it brings no luck with it at all."

"Oh, *this* is all right," said Walter, who, with his beer

beside him, his pipe in his mouth, and his favourite sister to tell his wonderful yarns to, was in a state of beatification, "I'm always hearing something from the Hottentots —a pearl fishery, a cargo of whalebone, all sorts of things, and as soon as this show is started, I'm going off to look at something else.

"The niggers like me," he went on, "the only thing they understand is *strength*," and he stooped down, and rolled up the trouser that refused to set in sartorial lines of grace over the gnarled muscle below; "just look at that, Becky," and he exposed a bare, brawny leg to her gaze, while a triumph that had been entirely absent when he spoke of a possible fortune irradiated all his broad, honest face.

It certainly was an amazing leg for such a little chap, and the arm that Walter proceeded to reveal was more amazing still, and hard as iron; but when he said that the one thing he most desired to do while in England was to match his strength against Sandow's, either at lifting weights or otherwise, Becky suddenly lost patience with him, declaring that it was his brain and his stomach he wanted over here, and not his arms and his legs.

This slight to what he was prouder of than anything in the world, rather affronted the pioneer, who said that if Sandow or anybody else could hold out seventy-five pounds at arm's length, as he could, he would take a back seat for ever, and he wound up by telling her that he thought she had a bit of a temper, though it was not a patch on his Tolly's.

"Walter!" cried out Becky, "you're married? And

when I thought the boys of our family were just as clever at keeping out of matrimony as the girls at getting into it!"

"Over there," said Walter, hiding some shyness in the jug, "if a man and woman agree to keep true to each other, they're married—just as long as they do," he added conclusively; "and of course my Tolly and I *do* keep true. I haven't seen her for a year or more, and shan't see her for another. There's all that guano to be got out; it's a big thing," he added simply. "And I've named my little girl after you——"

"Walter!" cried Becky again, struck by something in his face, "wh—what colour is she?"

"Well," said Walter, with a large air of toleration, "she ain't exactly white!"

Becky sat down and laughed till she nearly cried. "Is she—is she like you?" she inquired at last, scanning Walter's weather-beaten face, with the illuminating light of a Hottentot lady in the background, for some visual notion of the baby.

"You'll see," said Walter, nodding, "because I'm going to send her home to you to be educated."

"Oh, thank you, Walter!" said poor Becky in a sprightly tone. "But don't you—don't you think it's rather cruel to take the poor little thing away from its mother?"

For Becky was indeed one of those people who are always in the foreground when things go wrong, and quite overlooked when anything nice is in the wind; or, as she sometimes put it, coffins always stopped at her gate, but the fairy godmother never. And she meant to have inscribed on her tombstone: "Killed by the family!"

"And so you're not married, Becky?" said Walter, abruptly changing the conversation; "how's that?"

"Perhaps it is because men have no taste nowadays; or have women too much?" she added reflectively. "Four married sisters—two misfits, one fairly easy, one compromise—no, thank you! Marriage is for those fools who have not studied their yoked acquaintance, and fully considered their ways."

"I never saw such a set of girls for lovers," said Walter. "Wherever you went at home—and the house and grounds were big enough—you were sure to tread on one of them. Molly was an awful flirt," he continued meditatively; "do you remember how the poor Gov. turned up when she was with Bobbie Gilman in the garden, and she caught the scraper in her dress as she rushed upstairs, and bang, bang, it went all the way up, every step, for she daren't stop! O Lord! And when she was engaged to that rich fat chap the Gov. wanted her to marry, who ate such a lot when she felt ill, the more buttered toast he ate, the more she hated him, and she used to set him to read Boswell's 'Life of Johnson' aloud while she sat a mile off, so that he shouldn't make love to her?"

"I was in the nursery then," said Becky, who was indeed the Benjamin of the family, and two minutes younger than her eldest niece.

It was at this moment that Jeames threw open the door, and, taking in the *coup d'œil* of Walter's noble bare leg and biceps, announced with inward sniggering satisfaction, "Mr. Billy Carrington."

CHAPTER II

"We are no other than a moving row
Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the sun-illumined lantern, held
In midnight by the Master of the Show."

NATURE had been in humorous mood when she made Billy Carrington, and humour is more unpurchasable than spikenard, shedding an even greater fragrance abroad. An irrepressible smile would rise to every lip when the young attaché and his eye-glass, which suggested perennial astonishment, appeared, and instinctively you settled yourself as in a stall, with "A Night Out" or "On and Off" in prospect, delighted to feel that you had left tragedy safely under lock and key with the domestic skeleton at home.

It was not so much what Billy said, as how he looked while saying it, and Becky saw a good deal of the young man, not that she liked him so much, but because she disliked other men so much more.

And yet Becky scowled at sight of him, though in no way taken aback, for a pretty girl may have an orang-outang for a father, and a baboon for a mother, yet receive the unquestioning honours due to beauty all the world over.

"Jane Pomeroy's away," she said; "didn't I tell you not to call until she came back, Billy?"

"I thought you'd be dull," said Billy, turning his illuminating eye-glass on Walter, or rather on as much of him as could be seen behind the beer-jug; but when Becky introduced the stranger as her brother from West Africa, Billy did not turn a hair.

"Delighted to meet you," said Billy, as indeed he was, as with Walter for gooseberry, he could call on Becky every day in the week, and he plunged at once into genial talk about Africa, for his manners were charming. Being born in the purple had not hurt him in the least.

Becky sat silent, and contrasting the two men, decided that Billy was too highly civilised, too foppishly well groomed, when opposed to the tough vigour of the rough-clad pioneer beside him, whose every word, naked as truth, had its just weight and value. For this boy, brought up in the lap of luxury, and who had made haste to bundle off that softness, as hardy things will, and go forth to battle with life—the living of it, not the surroundings, being his chief concern—was an extraordinary instance of the old savage type that, beaten out by civilisation, yet recurs here and there in the history of the race, to wage unconscious war against the false conditions of society.

They were talking of Africa generally, not of Walter's discovery, talking gravely, as men do on vital subjects, Billy with an interest rare in him—but even the coldest blood had been stirred of late years by the wars, mysteries, treasures, and surprises of that wonderful Land of Ophir so long foretold, and now at last revealed in all its splendour to our living eyes.

Naturally, they spoke most of British supremacy there, and if Walter, with great good taste, forebore to intrude the fascinating subject of his arms and legs, even pulling down his shirt sleeve, and tugging at a straining trouser-leg, it was quite clear that he regarded physical strength as one of the main factors in our success.

"What makes the British the dominant power in South Africa is, that they have arrived at this position, less by right of conquest than by sheer 'grit' and power of adapting themselves to the roughest surroundings," said Walter. "They have cut the word 'can't' out of their dictionary, and even our enemies admit us to be the finest colonists in the world."

Billy nodded.

For the moment he felt as Jacob did beside Esau, the hunter, the man of action, and wished himself an Esau, living the open-air life of a man, not the underworld, artificial one of town.

"You see," said Walter, "our history over there really began in 1820, when the first English settlers arrived at Cape Colony, and knowing nothing of times and seasons, and with no one to teach them, understanding indoor handicraft only, had to fight for the simplest necessaries of life. Well, they did fight; in double quick time they proved themselves the very life of the colony; they wielded spade and plough, built houses, dug gardens, herded cattle, hunted the bush for deer, starved more than half their time, for floods, blights, and pests destroyed their lands and crops, and they were constantly entangled in bloody wars with the blacks, and had to

fight for life and home—but what matter? Where they had been dumped down, there they took root, little knowing that by their pluck and staying power they were laying the foundations of British South African dominion."

"Good," said Billy, with sparkling eyes, and Becky looked at him with surprise; he was much more interesting thus than when making love.

"As they worked, so they fought," went on Walter, "and every struggle added fresh territory to the colony. There is not one flourishing town to-day, that does not owe its vigorous life to those plucky settlers of two generations ago. The Dutch, who had twice tried the land, and both times pronounced it barren, might have done all that our men did—and didn't. But the Boers—dirty devils that they are—have something to complain of," he added, then thought of Majuba Hill, and walked to the fireplace and spat solemnly, as all good Englishmen do when they hear the two words that might have been our glory, but were turned by Gladstone into our national shame. For everything that would have been accomplished, he undid, and this total reversal of a sound and hopeful policy was in the end as disastrous to the colony as it was to the Kaffirs themselves.

"And what about the Boers?" said Becky.

"The Boer," said Walter, "is pious, dirty, and immoral, with the offensiveness of a harmless country rustic, who is literally too ignorant to know any better. He regards us as military blunderers, and rolls Majuba Hill as a rich morsel under his tongue when he wishes to be insulting,

and has drunk too much schnapps, or too little. They never understood that, nor the blacks either—they thought we were afraid. We've been rubbing it into them ever since that we are afraid. Still, the Boers got to Africa before we did, and first we cut them out, then we drove them from the Colony by British misrule to Natal, where they had to subject themselves to British arms.

"Whichever way they want to trek, England has drawn a territorial ring fence round it, and you can't wonder that they hate the 'damned Englishman,' as they politely call him. They did a plucky thing when they made their famous trek from Cape Colony, just what we would have done ourselves, ten thousand men, women, and children, including Oom Paul."

"I can fancy him," cried Becky, "in a nice clean pinafore, and his eyes turned up, leading them like an infant Moses into the Promised Land. Only he went one better than milk and honey; he found them diamonds and gold!"

"Well," said Walter, with a grin, "they *did* compare themselves to the children of Israel marching out of Egypt, and they couldn't have a better leader, for what Oom Paul does not know is not much worth knowing. Bismarck owned that Oom was more than a match for him, and the cleverest statesman in the whole world. Anyway, the great trek was the parting of Dutch and English ways, and they won't reunite in our time, you bet." Then his face became grave.

"Carrington," he continued, "the black and the white there'll *have* to be brothers, we've got to swallow it, for

they are millions to our hundreds, and the blacks like the British; if they must submit, they'd prefer us. Keep 'em from drink and their own assegais, and they'll have a better time with us than under their cannibal chiefs and horrid native customs. And, anyway, we don't punish a native as a Boer does, by krinking, or stretching the poor devil on his waggon wheel, or exercising a hide-thonged whip on his back.

"But first, and there's only one way to deal with 'em," and he brought his right fist with a sounding smack into his left palm, "we must smash 'em. Once they've learnt we're masters, they'll be all right. So shall we.

"'Palele,' which means done for, is the verdict of the natives upon us in South Africa."

"Why do they call the Boers Dutch?" struck in Becky.

"Wal, they're a little of everybody; a dash of French-Huguenot, a little of the Portuguese, the German, the British, the Hollander, the Africander; but all whites who are small farmers, and speak the *taal*, are reckoned Boers. At least half a million people are bound together by this link, and we laugh at this bond of union between them, and can't speak even the few hundred words in it—and they laugh at us, as the small rural farmers do at the people who live in cities.

"The Boer provides for his own family, and expects his neighbour to do the same; and there's something in that," added Walter, for the simple Biblical line of the Boer's life, among his flocks and herds, commended itself to the boy's primitive mind. And their dislike to cold

water did not greatly damage them in his eyes, for he had gone too frequently without it to regard its waste with satisfaction or even equanimity. After all, perhaps we all wash too much; our forefathers who seldom washed at all, lived happier lives, and had certainly cleaner minds than ours are to-day.

"In short, good patriarchs but bad citizens," said Billy. "The whole point seems to be, not to settle the squabbles of Afrikanders, Irish, Hollanders, Dutch or Germans, but to decide a struggle for power between English and Dutch, and to establish in Africa that freedom of justice, in the place of Boer tyranny and oppression, which our Queen rightly demands for all her subjects. Thank God, we have Rhodes."

"Rhodes is South Africa, and South Africa is Rhodes," said Walter, "and we *do* thank God for him," and he retired into the beer-jug to drink his health.

Billy got up, and began striding about the room; he was so intensely interested in the subject that even his sense of humour was completely swamped, and suddenly it occurred to Becky that underneath an affectation of folly, and the tastes of a latter-day *raffiné*, he was every whit as real a man in his way as her brother. Yet this astonished her, for every woman thinks a man's character is of precisely the depth into which she can dip her own little tin pannikin, and fish out just as much as she requires, leaving nothing over for himself. And she had falsely supposed that man as a humorous animal is never in earnest, and as an artist she was rather indignant with Billy for spoiling his really uncommon *genre*.

"I have a young cousin out there," he said, "and when he came home last year, he told us a lot. It seems to me that our first struggle with the Matabele instilled a very wholesome respect for us in the native mind, and our prestige, that real but shadowy power which rules India to-day, stood so high that the Englishman was regarded as an altogether superior being to any of the other Europeans with whom the native came in contact.

"But Kruger and Leyds have changed all that. The deliberate insolence which has been shown by the Boers to our countrymen ever since Majuba, has gradually had its natural effect upon the native mind, and once sweep fear away, our only influence over them is gone; for kindness they regard as weakness, and the natives are possessed by the mad dream of their ancestors. They believe their great day of settling us once for all has come, and fight like heroes, with a magnificent contempt for death that we cannot beat."

"They are splendid chaps," said Walter, "those Basutos—good, muscular, coloured Christians, and, given security of life and property, they and the Bechuanas and Mashonas are comparatively safe; it is the martial Kaffir, the Zulu, and the Matabele, who are never safe; their profession is war; their traditions of government and social life are bound up in it, and the soldier can no more forget what he was bred up to—his profession, in fact—than an Englishman can his country. They are the aristocrats among the fighting tribes, as the Guards are among our other regiments."

Billy nodded. He also knew that these Basutos

could give points in morality to any other race on earth; death to the man, banishment to the woman, is the punishment for breaking their practically inviolable marriage laws.

"But a white man's country, Carrington, it can't be till a general rising of armed natives is rendered impossible by their being 'placed out' in our wide areas under efficient supervision, with enough occupation to keep their thoughts from turning to the old time of military prestige and slaughter, and with sufficient food to keep them from raiding in search of more. Rhodes' Glen Grey Act is framed to do all these things. Otherwise they'll be stamped out, poor devils, or efface themselves with white men's vices, and white men's rum. Not that they are lazier than the Boers, who quietly sat down and winked the other eye, while we sweated and toiled to open up the country and the mines—and when harvest day came just weighed in, and copped the lot."

"It's the Transvaal that blocks the way," said Billy, "as she has done these ten years, to every great scheme of South African unity—her temper was significantly shown in closing the Vaal drifts. She stands like a Pillar of Salt amidst a circle of progressive states and colonies, blind, deaf, stupid, and within measurable distance of her fall, an almost incredible survival of conservatism that a rapidly flowing sea of civilisation will entirely sweep away.

"A Boer is the finest obstructive in the world. His outlook is that of the seventeenth century—the same

vices and virtues among so-called civilised peoples. Consequently culture in the Transvaal appears to be confined almost entirely to the foreign population."

"And they're so beastly pious," said Walter; "a Boer will go down on his knees, and ask God's blessing on the virulent alcoholic poison he sells to the blacks; he holds up his unwashed hands in horror at the English infidel, he drinks heavily in and out of season, and the vices of his rural simplicity will easily give point to Johannesburg vice——"

Walter stopped abruptly, and blushed, for he had forgotten Becky's presence, but she did not look in the least shy, and was indeed keenly enjoying this masculine talk.

"Will diplomacy or the bullet bring this about?" said Billy thoughtfully, "or will the railways do it, when the first engine steams over Lobengula's old kraal?"

"Is it true," cried Becky, "that Mashonaland and Matabeleland are the Land of Ophir mentioned in the Bible, and that ancient ruins in the territory of the Chartered Company show traces of the mining activities of a highly-skilled old-time race, and did the Matabele know all along about the gold there?"

"Yes, and what the natives don't know about the country is not worth knowing," said Walter with a great deal of meaning, as he thought of other treasures up his sleeve, and then, feeling the fatigues of a serious conversation, conducted under the auspices of an empty beer-jug, to be getting too much for him, he suggested

rather shyly that he should give them what he called a little sing-song, at which Becky gasped, never having dreamed even of the conjunction of Walter and music. But Billy encouraged him, and squaring his shoulders nobly, with arms flat to his sides, and head well thrown back, like Tommy Atkins at attention, Walter began.

Boreas, endowed with infinite tenderness of heart, a sense of pathos that roared aloud, and an entire absence of time and tune, *might* have sung that quaint and touching plantation song as Walter then sang "Cora Bell." But the words were so sweet, and the story of them so sad, that, quite unexpectedly, the pathos of it all touched Becky, and brought smarting tears to her eyes, and somehow there was trouble in her heart as she looked at the modest, unheroic figure of the pioneer who had come so many thousands of miles, and done such wonderful things, only to relate how his pretty, his *pretty* Cora Bell had been stolen from him by the white man, to creep back broken-hearted.

"And in these arms she *died!*"

"And now," said Walter, when he had finished with a particularly well-sustained note, into which he put the full vigour of his lungs, and heart, and soul, "I'm going downstairs to Mrs. Quekett," and he vanished into the basement of the house, while Becky and Billy dropped into chairs, and laughed till they ached.

But suddenly Becky remembered something, and arose in her wrath.

"Billy," she said, "you have deceived me. Serious people are a drug in the market. I thought you a

humorist, and it's much more becoming to you than being in deadly earnest; so drop it, Billy. Life is a pantomime, and it is the clown who makes us laugh oftenest, that we love most."

"I'll clown for you to my dying day if you'll sit in the stalls, and go home with me after the play," said Billy, carefully sticking in his eye-glass, and looking at once the born buffoon who had supplied Becky with so many happy, rollicking hours.

"But you might forget, and preach," said Becky, to whom his earnestness had, on the whole, come as a disagreeable revelation. For there was enough hidden earnestness in herself to suffice for half-a-dozen husbands.

"It's that brother of yours," he said, and dropped his eye-glass; "somehow the desert is not conducive to humour. When you look at him, and realise all he has done, all he has gone through—all he could say and doesn't—well, it makes you feel a frockcoat an abomination, and yourself an old woman in it."

"Thank you, Billy," cried Becky, advancing on him so warmly that it would have seemed quite the right thing in the right place, if she had kissed him. "Thank God you are not a snob; a murderer I can forgive—probably the person murdered was maddening, but a snob, an underbred, crawling snob, who rates you by what you have got, not by what you *are*, he deserves to be a Boer. Will you please kick that footman soundly, Billy, when he shows you out?"

At that moment, like the roar of a wounded bull came from the basement to the upper regions.

"Then *car*-ry me back to *old* Ten-nes-*see!*"

The swing-door at the top of the stairs was smartly shut, and the rest inaudible, and Becky, seizing Billy's hat and stick, thrust them inhospitably into his unwilling hands.

"Go—go!" she said, "I have to send for mother, and despoil Walter of his duds; and—and—don't dare to be tragic next time you come. If you are, I'll have to——"

"Marry me to correct the fatal tendency," he said; as he vanished through the doorway.

CHAPTER III

"The moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wash out a Word of it."

WHEN Becky's wire arrived, the old mother was in very fact sitting before the big Bible in which were inscribed the names of her twelve children, and such deeds of prowess as her sons had from time to time performed. If there were blank spaces opposite all the girls, save the naked announcement of four sons-in-law, who shall blame her? For does not every good old-fashioned mother unconsciously bow to the superior sex, even as she herself has been well disciplined by man?

Mrs. Bethune felt no scruples about showing the contempt she felt for women, and was only really happy when she had a man's arm to lean on, whether old or young did not matter in the least; for the coat sleeve to be masculine was enough, though naturally she preferred her own sons!

In half-an-hour her modest kit was ready (she gave away too much to be passing rich herself), her train looked out, and three hours later she had arrived at St. Pancras, where Walter, clothed in a ready-made suit of serge purchased by Becky, and a pot hat that sat com-

fortably on the nape of his neck, and nowhere else, was waiting to receive her.

Through how many perils had the boy passed since his mother's arms were round his neck? Who so proud as she when, blissfully taking his arm, she walked with little short steps up the platform, and was presently driving away, with her tiny box outside, through the brightly-lit streets? And on the road the wonderful story of the guano was repeated and rejoiced over.

"Mother," said Walter suddenly, when they had nearly arrived at their destination, "why doesn't Becky marry? All the others were wives long before her age, and I saw a fellow there to-day who looks a fool, but talks sense, and can't keep his eyes off her. He seems a good sort of in-door chap."

"Becky doesn't think much of the men," said his mother, with a little sniff that implied she pitied her taste, and indeed there was a cool, calm impartiality in the way she looked at her girls that dressed them in no fine plumes, and she had been known to say, when she heard a daughter had been the beauty of some assembly, that she was sure she could not imagine what the other women must have been like!

"I'm glad Jane Pomeroy's away," she said, as the cab rounded the top of Hill Street, and Walter grinned, for he knew the old feud between the pair. Mrs. Bethune, as the mother of twelve children (mostly failures), despised the childless rich woman who had made of life a success, and partook of her sister-in-law's elegant hospitality as rarely as possible.

"News!" cried Becky, meeting them at the door when they arrived, and brandishing a foreign telegram before their eyes. "Your pal has got the concession, home to-morrow night!"

Walter chuckled, but said nothing as he shouldered his mother's box, and ignoring Jeames, stalked upstairs with it, immediately returning to invite the cabby round the corner to have a drink, which was *his* way of celebrating the concession. Possibly a course of desert puts a fancy value on liquid of all kinds; but certain it is that Walter showed a laudable anxiety to make up for lost time, and that his country ideas of hospitality ran into the extreme of wanting to stand unlimited treat to every soul he met. And so on this occasion he tried to make some one happy —never giving even a thought to the glory of the news.

The missus was glad to see Becky, but could not bear her son out of her sight, and wanted to accompany him, when he announced that he was going to spend the dinner-hour with Mrs. Quekett.

"I never eat but once a day," he said, "and I like to kill and cook it myself; there's no taste in it else."

But later on, and only on condition that he was not asked to sit in the drawing-room, Walter reascended, and beside a blazing fire in the study, yarned to his womenkind. Would that I could reproduce those yarns, with their colour, their truth, their absolute unconsciousness of heroism!—mere bald narratives of adventures and escapes that thrilled Becky's blood, Becky, who was at heart not the rake Pope declared every woman to be,

but a wild, untamed creature, as eager to see life, ay, and if necessary, to lose it as her brother.

"And you don't even know how to tell it!" she cried once, when her vivid imagination had supplied all that he left out; for those who have the gift of expression never have anything to describe, and those who have lived it all, and could really instruct us, are silent, while it is only by the rarest mischance that the papers ever give us the truth.

"Walter," said his mother, who was not imaginative, "did you get those flannel shirts I sent you?"

Walter looked guilty. Three of those shirts were at that very moment adorning three Hottentots' backs—for it is a mania with these people to be even partly clothed, and any one of them will cheerfully work for you, murder for you, even die for you, if first you give him an old frock-coat and tall hat—the rest of him being frankly in the state described as "mit nodings on." A pair of bags is the next most valued belonging, but it is absolutely essential to Hottentot fashion that they should have a large patch on them, and if of a very large plaid, so much the better. A short cut-away coat (and nothing else), tightly belted in round the waist, has a particularly fine effect on a black skin; and those who are naked and unashamed, hate with a consuming envy those who are clad.

"You must make me some more, mother," said Walter, "for I don't expect I shall be here long. Our summer is your winter, and I've got that little walk before me, and must get home quick."

"And is that your home, Walter?" cried Becky re-

proachfully, not knowing that the African explorer's fever once kindled, never dies, and that human beings, however near and dear, are nothing; the burning desert *draws* him, and he must go.

"Well, Becky," he said apologetically, "you see, I'm so fit there, never ail anything; the air's like champagne; it never rains, and you can sleep out in the open all the year round. You'd better come out, and bring the missus, neither of you would ever want to come back."

"I shouldn't mind it at all," said his mother, who with Becky was sitting in the bright circle of lamplight, doing some of that fine needlework her soul loved, and that Becky was very keen on too.

"Lord!" he said, looking at the peaceful picture they presented, "to think it's eight years since I saw you two sitting like that! You're getting on a bit, Becky, don't you think it's about time you made up your mind?"

"I am twenty-two," said Becky, "and am usually taken for eighteen—ahem! No credit to me—we wear like Methuselahs in our family. Look at the missus! She's seventy next birthday, and her eyes are bluer, and her hair is thicker than mine."

"Girls brushed their hair in my days," said her mother, "and did not ride bikes."

"I'd like to see my Tolly doing it," exclaimed Walter ferociously.

"So should I," said Becky, "through the park, in her best necklace, and a pair of bangles. You're quite

out of it, my poor boy!" and she tapped his head smartly with her little thimble; "and evidently don't know that man's trembling claims on woman are now utterly and entirely demolished by—the bike! The bike has severed the very last strands that restrained us, and hey presto! away we go, free women, able at last to gratify our wild instincts, able to show a clean pair of heels to our lovers —able to do altogether without them, for lovers could never give us half the *joie de vivre* a bike does."

"You are talking great nonsense!" said the missus, who would have counted these remarks as pearls had they fallen from a son's lips.

"Mother, dear," said Becky, "would you be surprised to hear that Walter has a little daughter, and she ain't exactly *white*?"

Walter blushed. It was not easy for the African hue of his face to get deeper, but it did; and quite unexpectedly, the missus held her work up before her face, and laughed heartily.

"She is named after me, mother," said the girl, as Walter retired shyly behind his never-failing jug of beer.

"And pray, Walter, why didn't your wife come home with you?" said the missus.

"Why, of course Walter wants her out there," cried Becky, "to cook and wash, and do things for him;" she stopped to laugh as Walter tore off, and hurled from him, the collar that had been a source of pain and grief to him all the evening.

"And I should love to help. Haven't I always longed to be a wanderer, and live like a gipsy in a caravan?

And this would be much more interesting. Mother, didn't you say you would come too?"

The missus announced herself as quite ready; and indeed, if one of her boys had led her into the jaws of a lion, she would have submitted cheerfully to be scrunched up without a single cry.

"When the settlement's built, perhaps," said Walter, "but my pal will have all his work cut out for him. You see, every ton of guano has to be carried through the surf to the boats, and then the surf boats will have a job to get to the ships, for the surf is never for twenty-four hours alike. Suddenly there will be a very heavy sea from perhaps a couple of days to six weeks; then a fortnight of clear weather—in winter about two days out of five or six. Only surf-boys can manage those boats; they have to dodge waves as high as houses, and it's ticklish work. The steersman knows when the boat is going over, and the blackies all dive like ducks on either side; it would make you laugh to see 'em."

"And pray," said the missus, "what is *your* share to be?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"He'll give me what he likes," he said, with that large indifference to money habitual to the man of few wants; and his mother's face fell, for were not the noble unemployed of the family always tugging at her purse, and who more fit to enlarge their borders than their own brother?

But now he shirked the subject, and went on to talk of his little daughter, whom he evidently loved most

passionately, but when hard pressed by Becky for a description of Tolly, could only describe her as a "racer." In a way Walter seemed proud of his Tolly, and notably of her temper.

"When she is in one of her tearing tantrums I just tie her up to a tree," he remarked; evidently the golden rule for the walnut-tree, and the spaniel, applies equally to women all the world over.

And somehow Becky fancied that, as a primitive man who had to earn his food as best he might, love had never ranked high in Walter's existence; for who can suppose that Adam had time to sit at Eve's feet, and talk of nothing else, when there was his and her dinner to get? He had to forage for her, to migrate with the seasons; and no doubt she was expected to make herself useful, after a simple fashion that women, overweighted by the artificial cares and fatigues of civilisation, might well envy to-day.

The missus showed little interest in the subject of Walter's wife; after all, the old are wiser than we think in taking one thing at a time, and to see as much of Walter as possible, and to get ready in time his new flannel shirts, was about all she could comfortably manage.

"Walter," said Becky, "were you ever among cannibals?"

"Yes, and they are really capital fellows, devoted to their wives and children, and not beastly proud like the non-cannibal tribes who sneer at the others' fondness for their women, and who never seem to display any signs of tenderness towards their own. Just like those canting humbugs here, who get drunk on teetotal wines, and hold up their

hands at an honest man drinking his beer. Did you read that show up of teetotal drinks the other day? They not only get more alcohol than the sinners, but all the honour and glory! For my part, I like a good honest vice or two in the open; and if you could see these natives preparing for one of their orgies, watch their bright faces, hear their rich, wild song, note the serene calm of the scene, the perfect accord and sympathy between them and Nature—well, you might think you had got among the gentlest people upon earth."

"Do they fry or boil them?" inquired Becky with interest. "But I should have thought that white people would taste nicer—and cleaner—than black. Perhaps they thought you looked tough!"

"Wal, the pieces they brought me at the end of a stick—which was a great proof of friendship—I didn't take, and the beggars were bitterly disappointed. But some of them have awfully nice feelings," and Walter chuckled. "For instance, one man, who supplied 'joints' to the village, potted his own father by mistake, but would neither sell nor eat him, but handed him over to neighbours who had no scruples! You see, a nigger monarch's power is measured by the number of heads adorning his palace stockade, or the extent of palace road neatly paved with human skulls. As these skulls are firmly embedded in the earth, and are worn and polished white by naked feet, they give the royal walk quite a marble-like appearance. And it ain't healthy to have twins there—they are murdered, and the poor mother also, or she is kept alive to endure perpetual disgrace."

The missus bridled at this—she had once perpetrated the offence herself.

"But lord, Becky, they don't want your blood, only your cotton goods and brass rods; and it isn't safe to leave a copper boiler about, it disappears, and all the women in the neighbourhood burst out in copper nose and ankle rings made of the precious metal; though they cut poor figures beside the tattooed beauties—you will see a stout Lolo lady sporting the entire solar system on her back."

"And they drink, don't they?" said Becky.

"Whenever they can; but in the Congo States, wine plays an important part in all functions, public or private. The Malafu palm wine is very heady, especially after standing in the sun; orators drink it before palavers, warriors before fighting."

The missus here cut in, practically enough, and asked him how much money he had brought home. Walter fished out, and untied, a red bandana handkerchief that contained fifty sovereigns, every coin of it earned, hardly enough, by sealing, and he gave her ten of these, ostensibly for herself, but knowing full well those gaping pockets of the noble unemployed to which they would inevitably find their way.

"Youth no gettings,
Age all frettings,"

said Becky with a sigh, though to her money had no intrinsic value, it merely represented power over the beauty and charm of life.

"I made that up myself. Will money *ever* come to us to stay, I wonder?"

But tying that knot in his bandana had reminded Walter of something, and he put the top of his forefinger into an indentation of his skull, just above his forehead, that she had already noticed.

"See that, Becky, I got it in a row at Cape Town. One of the boys hit me with a piece of lead tied up in a handkerchief. I was pretty bad that time," he added meditatively; "my skull cracked like an egg-shell. But I managed to keep the doctors out with a revolver," he chuckled and heaved in his characteristic way; "and though I had a narrow squeak for it, I got all right without them, as I'd always done before."

"Did you, Walter?" said Becky with a troubled air, for she found a great difference in him since his last visit home; there was a lack of concentration, a tendency to let vital things slide, and amuse himself with "yarning" instead; and there were other things too, that were explainable only by such a mischief to the brain as he had refused medical help for, and from the effects of which he would probably suffer in obscure ways to his dying day.

She thought he looked broken and ill, as he sat with the neglected pipe in his hand, and it flashed on her suddenly that he had come home for the last time, that whether he found a fortune or no, once departed, they would see him no more.

"It's this beastly climate," he said; "I'm never sick, never ail anything, out there. You can drink the air like water; it comes liquid and pure, straight from far-off hills, and across wide rolling veldts; you never knew

anything like the exhilarating, life-giving properties of it. Even the winters are glorious, dry and full of sunshine, and the atmosphere is so clear that at a dozen miles' distance you can see every stone and stump on the hill-side, while mountains forty miles away, show like clouds between the trees—only there are no shadows of clouds, only of distance; and the moonlight is like daylight," added Walter, whose face had changed and softened as a man's does when speaking of a beloved mistress.

The spell was upon him, and he went on speaking as if to himself, and not as he usually spoke.

"There's the lightning," he said; "you can watch it for hours after a big storm has gone over, and its variety and colour is incredible; and then, though the desert's bare enough, I've been in parts of Africa where you'll see oranges hanging over rose-covered hedges; and in the places where rain falls, flowers spring up like magic under a spring shower, some of them real English ones, scarlet and purple heaths, and creepers and soft mosses like ours; but the orchids always seem strange, and one gets to hate the big palms after a bit—they are the East, and you can't get away from 'em; and the lemon and orange groves aren't English either, nor the silver tree, whose leaves flash and glisten in the sun side by side with the good old oaks and chestnuts."

His talk ranged over a vast area, embracing seals and guano, gold and diamonds, war and husbandry, the tracking of big game, and the shooting of small, the ins and outs of a true pearl fishery, and a false one, the collecting of birds' eggs—each and all of these enterprises

being conducted by him single-handed, and arrayed in those seven-leagued boots that seemed to have devoured the whole continent, and taken a look-in at whatever was most worth seeing.

For wherever there was something to be done, or fighting going on, there had he been in the thick of it. If women were to be protected, or life to be saved, he was there, his sole wealth consisting of what he stood up in, and with the earth for his bed; a gun, a handful of cartridges, and a couple of water-bottles slung on his back, behold him equipped to cross the world.

In his yarns the boy modestly mentioned none of these things. He talked presently of a great pal of his named David, to whom he had once rendered a slight service (for thus he described it), and he wanted his mother and Becky to be very kind to him when he came home. It struck the girl afterwards that, following immediately on the mention of David's name, had come a discussion on death, Walter stoutly averring that no man can die till his hour is set and his time up, and Becky agreed with him.

"I'm a bit of a fatalist," she said; "and death will spare you in battle, flood, pestilence—in a hundred perils—and strike you when wrapped up in cotton-wool, or run over you in the shape of an omnibus. Why? Because you *can't* die till your time has come; even if you kill yourself, perhaps you've been allowed to do it, because you would do worse harm by remaining alive, and God won't have it; for don't you suppose our time of dying, as of work, is arranged for in His wonderful scheme of human life?

"I often think of the Persian story of the man who was foretold he would die on a mountain, and he hugged himself, for he lived on a plain, and took care never, for one hour even, to leave it. But there came an earthquake, and the plain threw up a mountain, on which he perished. And it always seemed to me that the fear of death is so contemptible, so useless—all your fears and prayers can't retard or hasten it. So why fear and pray?"

Walter nodded. "That's true," he said; "when your hour strikes you go—you can't before.

"But David——" He paused and checked himself, then went on. "He is a hunter of big game, and believe me, Becky, he and other elephant-hunters have done more to open up unexplored regions, than all the pioneers put together; but for them there'd be no Rhodesia now, and David's one of the best. When he comes home—if he does come, for Africa's his home as much as mine—just you be kind to him. None of your flirting, mind," he added with a ferocious scowl; "David's too good for that."

"Then tell David to stay away," said Becky pertly, but with such a look of mischief in her eyes that Walter felt a profound mistrust for her intentions; and, indeed, women's methods were Greek to his simple, direct mind, and flirtation was an elegant art that he had never even attempted to acquire.

But when at last she went upstairs, leaving her mother to an unmolested confab with the best loved of her seven sons, Becky found herself puzzling over the reason that

had identified David and death in her mind, and she resolved to tackle the Pioneer on the subject at the very first opportunity.

Presently she fell asleep, to dream that she was digging out endless bucketfuls of guano that looked like dry snuff, each of which represented some long-cherished want, but that one after the other, they were washed overboard from the surf-boats that toiled in vain to reach the ship that waited without.

CHAPTER IV

"No man knows where he shall die."

"I HAVE scarcely seen Walter to-day," said the missus, whose intellectual outlook had always been bounded north, south, east, and west by her family affections, pausing in her restless walk up and down the room, for her heart ached—she wanted Walter; the time was growing short, and she grudged every hour he was out of her sight.

He often went out on mysterious errands, and came home fagged and tired, but declining to say a single word about business, or mention what share was to be his out of the fortune he had made blindly over to his partner. Possibly he realised that he had made a fool of himself, more likely still, his real indifference to money made him suppose others equally so, and so he blundered along the quixotic way that was to leave him empty-handed, a mark for the contempt of all business men.

But when at home, as regarded his mother, Walter was not a little selfish, and the drawing-room was anathema maranatha to him. To talk about his muscles, to treat every soul he met out of the gold he carried about tied up in a red bandana at the bottom of a capacious pocket, and to sing about his pretty, his *pretty* Cora Bell, or Ella, or some other dusky charmer loved in Maryland—these

were his joys, more freely to be indulged below stairs than above; so that he was like a plummet at the end of a string, which, whenever Becky and the missus let go, descended sheer, and without a moment's pause, to the housekeeper's parlour! And there, in the pleasant company of Mrs. Quekett, he would while the time away, and sample those drinks that most commended themselves to his honest soul.

But it was long before he found one that mitigated his state of chilly wretchedness, or gave him any sort of internal comfort. His own leaning, however, was towards good beer which struck cold; he then made tentative attempts at port that were not happy, while Burgundy, drunk on the top of milk, nearly cut short a promising career. Finally he anchored himself to rum and milk, and plenty of it, and did well.

A person who in the grip of malaria hardly ever ate, never dreamed of looking at an evening paper, took no interest in politics and things polite, and never even noticed if the four walls enclosing him were of mud or agate—what joys were open to him? He only knew that he stifled in the November fogs, longed for the smell of the sea and the pure air, the feel of the open veldt under his feet. Perhaps, too, he missed Tolly and her rages, and the little daughter he loved, and glad as he was to see the missus and Becky once more, he was already thinking of leaving them. Entirely out of his element as a civilised being, in coat and collar he was an anachronism, unpicturesque, helpless, and inept; whereas in his old shirt and bags, a gun under his arm, his feet

on African soil, with life to save, fighting to do, or some exploring job that required boundless pluck and endurance, he filled his proper place in the world's economy, and was supremely happy.

"I'll go and dig him out," said Becky, and by way of girding up her loins to the fight, flirted the tail of her evening gown over her arm, and boldly descended to those sacred regions in which she would not have dared to set foot had Mr. Quekett been at home—Mr. Quekett, who combined the manners and appearances of a bishop (as he ought to be) with the experiences of a thorough man of the world, and the unmorality of Japan.

Becky was afraid of this subterranean domain in which it was quite easy to lose oneself; and indeed such congeries was there of rooms, kitchens, pantries, and cellars, that Jane often complained the dishes were cold when they came to table, from the distance they had to be brought.

Passing Quekett's private room, she sought the housekeeper's, and there, in a big easy chair, with his feet up on another, sat the pioneer, tightly buttoned up in a greatcoat and with his hat on, fast asleep, while around him were scattered the bones at which his delicate appetite had recently been picking, and at his elbow a large jug containing rum and milk.

At a table near sat Mrs. Quekett, mending stockings, an occupation strikingly out of place in a room lined to the ceiling with sporting and hunting sketches, racers, pugilists, actresses, and all the odds and ends beloved of a man with horsy and sporting tastes, and who has been

denied the means of properly gratifying them. A racing calendar hanging in a prominent place, gave a shrewd hint as to why Mrs. Quekett patched up old stockings, instead of buying new ones, and Becky shook her head as she glanced round the walls. She knew as well as his wife did, that if Quekett did not pull up in time, horses would be his ruin.

A number of prints were turned with their faces to the wall, and as Becky silently pointed to them, Mrs. Quekett, who had risen, smiled and said—

"Mr. Walter did that. He says they're indecent—that they've got no clothes on," at which Becky grinned, thinking of Tolly.

"Mother is fretting after him," she said, "can't you persuade him to come up? And before I forget it—if Quekett doesn't come home soon, I shall murder that footman. Surely we could have managed with only the maids?"

"His manners are low," said the housekeeper calmly. She was one of those little shreds of women who make the world go round the way they choose, and are invariably snapped up by good-for-nothing men, "but we could not be without a man in the house while Quekett is away. And Mr. Walter likes to sing his bits of sing-songs here and keep warm, for that malarial fever hardly lets him sleep at all of nights."

Becky nodded. Once when she had stolen softly into his room at night to see how he fared, Walter had startled her by flinging aside the clothes, and springing to his feet, his hand going involuntarily to his side for firearms, and

she realised then that a savage, even in captivity, never sleeps well; he is like a forest animal with danger all around him, that has to trust to the keenness of his senses alone for safety. Safety! we civilised ones have that, and like coddled babes we are vigilantly watched over and protected, but all our finer energies rust, and instinct, sight, hearing, degenerate, ay, and our powers of enjoyment also, for the man whose blood has not been thrilled by fierce peril, or felt the physical lust of life flood his veins, has never tasted the real joy of existence.

"Mrs. Quekett," she said musingly, "what would he do if he were deaf? In civilisation, deafness is a lonely madness—it entombs you while yet alive—but in a natural state, and in darkness, imagine it! Baffled, confused—death within an ace of you—or safety when you suspect danger"—she shuddered, and then saw by a twitch of Walter's eyelids that he was listening, and she fell upon, and removed his hat, and dragged him off upstairs, bearing the milk-jug, on the principle of a handful of thistles held a few inches before a donkey's nose.

"Here he is, mother," she cried, and Mrs. Bethune received the boy like flowers in May, and was in heaven as she sat holding his scarred hand in both her own, while Becky set the fire roaring half up the chimney.

"It's so inartistic to be ill," said Becky, "it makes me furious. Give me health first, then love, then brains or good looks, and money will put the coping-stone on the edifice, but it's not everything—is it, Walter?"

"But it's hard to starve, and see your wife and child starve," said Walter, who was shaking in the grip of

the fever that alternately froze and scorched him, and that simple revelation of what he must have gone through moved Becky keenly.

It was a significant sign that in all his plans he never thought of himself, only of others—never saw himself rich, and sitting under his own vine and fig-tree in England; for in some subtle way, known only to those who are wooed by her, Africa had become to him his home, and with invisible but powerful hands drew him back to her warm breast. And once a pioneer always a pioneer, for seldom indeed does an explorer walk in the nice smooth road that he has made for others to enjoy, but never resting, never tiring, his eager feet carry him on to new places, till kindly death sets at last a limit to their wandering.

"I am like Little Tich," said Becky, "I could do, could do, could do with a bit! And it's humiliating when a cabman tells you he pities your cat. Walter, what made you talk of your friend David and death in the same breath the other day?"

"Oh, *he's* all right," said Walter. "But he'll never make old bones. You remember Walter Ingram's story, and how he died? Well—" he paused, "David's end will be something like that, if he doesn't look out. But he's an obstinate devil, and won't give in."

"What has he been doing—laying sacrilegious hands on mummies?" inquired Becky eagerly, "but, unless he goes to the Zoo, he can't be chawed up by an elephant *here*."

Walter shivered, whether from fever or his thoughts

Becky could not determine, and threw a strange glance around him, almost as if he expected something evil to be there.

"Well," he said, "a pretty girl can do anything with a man she likes, and in case I don't see him, just you give him this message from me, 'drop it!' That's all. Just 'drop it.' He'll understand. But don't you fall in love with him," he added uneasily. "David's unlucky, and you don't know what you would let yourself in for, and you might rue it, my girl."

Becky, still with a dingy image of Walter's friend in soiled duds before her, laughed, and thought she did not stand in any very serious danger.

"Cape Town is running in my head," Walter said restlessly, "and I think Table Mountain is hanging out its celebrated white table-cloth to-night."

"What is that?"

"Merely some ghostly linen it sports when a south-easter is at work; but when the mountain is in a good temper, you can get views along its plateaux, slopes, and kloofs, samples of all that is best in South African scenery. And in September, the flowering season, you will see countless sprays, cascades, and waterfalls, leaping from every ledge and precipice in all directions, chasing the colours that lie in great splashes on the hillside."

"It's big," said Becky, drawing a deep breath, "big and free. A woman could get away from her petticoats there, and all that these wretched petticoats mean. Tell me some more."

The door opened, and Billy with his crush hat in his

hand, walked in unexpectedly. There was nothing uncommon in the hat, nor the Inverness cape he wore, but he provoked smiles as usual, and the missus made an excuse to sit near him, and, with Walter on one side and Billy on the other, she looked supremely happy.

"Why so shy and snowdroppy?" inquired Becky presently, as she mixed Billy a whisky and soda.

But Billy disclaimed modesty, and said he had only looked in to wish the pioneer good luck on his long journey, as he himself was leaving town for a few days.

Walter waved away his journey as a mere casual event not worth mentioning; and indeed an easy progress across the ocean with unlimited opportunities for "yarning," was the merest trifle to a man who thought nothing of starting on a hundred miles' walk—just for a stroll, as he himself expressed it.

"Walter went shopping with me yesterday," said Becky, "and the way he pitied the shopman, and the way the elegant shopman sized up *him*, and pitied *me* was a treat."

"Poor devils!" said Walter with heartfelt sympathy; "fancy living an underground existence like that—half of the life in London is underground—and talk of slaves, why, our natives have a much better time. They can walk about in the open air, they aren't tied down to counters and desks, with no more right to walk in and out of the open door, than if they were prisoners on parole, it's voluntary imprisonment for the best part of their lives, and for what? Not wrongdoing, but sheer

lack of gold, because three-parts of the world sweats, that the fourth part may play the fool."

Becky nodded.

"It's true," she said, "and our endless artificial wants are at the bottom of it all. Only to think of it! *Here*, all except the few, fighting in the hand-to-hand struggle for existence; made criminals by the mere instinct of self-preservation; semi-starved bodily, wholly starved morally and mentally; not a single, simple, innocent pleasure, but what must be paid for; and out there, all that, and scarcely any to enjoy it."

"A labourer in the country is a king treading his own kingdom, compared to these poor devils," went on Walter, who had thought a lot while painfully attending Becky's raids into the region of what *she* found the necessaries, and *he* the superfluities of existence, "and they must feel mad when they look at the glass-door which cuts them off from the free jostling crowd on the other side, never to walk out in the sunshine except at the weekly holiday, to get old and grey in that prison, till a coffin finally encloses them—Lord, it isn't life as God meant it to be."

"It comes out in the children," said Becky. "If you walk in the park on Sundays, you'll see such a race of weird, pale, little people, as you never imagined; that is the under-world coming out to blink at the sun. I've been very ungrateful, Walter. You put it in a new light, and I won't grumble any more. I'll reflect that I can walk about free—that I am not the wrong side of that glass door.

"But there's something wrong somewhere. The first duty of man is to be happy, the second (but that is man's law, not God's) is to be good—and duty never satisfied the flesh yet. And, oh! please," she cried, clasping her hands, "we *all* want to be happy!"

"And, indeed, I would try and make you so, Becky," said Billy in a low tone.

"Nothing hurts a man, or a woman either, that he can do in the open air," said Walter, who had rather surprised himself by this disburdening of his views. He never said that our civilisation was rotten and false, he could not argue about it; he only knew that his senses rebelled at it; that his ears refused to admit the rubbish Billy and Becky sometimes talked; that their standards of conduct, enjoyment, and the things that really mattered, did not agree with his; that even their books, which he tried to read in the early mornings while all the world slept, were false also, for print covers a multitude of lies.

"Why don't more of 'em cut the shops, and marts, and cellars, and come out to Africa?" said Walter, getting excited, as he always did, when talking of his beloved mistress (was Tolly jealous?); "there's room and to spare for everybody, it's teeming with chances, begging for hands to till it, and if you were a boy, Becky, I'd say, pack your knapsack and come."

Becky looked down disconsolately at the petticoat that nowadays is veritably a badge of disgrace for every woman of spirit, for whether her own fault or not, these be bad days for women, and all her solid advantages are rocking away from her, and man's old chivalrous attitude towards

her is dead, now that she has come out into the arena to fight him, instead of welcoming him with tender arms when he returns from the fray. But the woman who cleaves to the old order of things, who is content to be protected, to love and forgive—why should she be misunderstood, and rudely hustled of man, till in her smart of wounded spirit she goes over to the other camp? And Becky felt that she envied Walter's Tolly, who clearly wore no petticoats, or how could she be a "racer"?

"Walter," she said, "you are truer to nature than we are—you do the things that you like, and say you like them, and we pretend to do the things that we like, and hate them all the time, but have not the courage to say it;" and truly the man who has never read, but kept his mind a virgin kingdom from the classics and penny literature alike, is able to sample his own emotions in a way no mere sounding-board for other men's thoughts and feelings ever can.

While the others talked, with a queer feeling of blankness she thought of the time when Walter would be gone, and she would divide her time between Aunt Jem and the missus at the Lavenders, and everything would go on as before. But would it be quite the same? Walter had brought a fresh current of life into her somewhat monotonous round of days; strengthened in her the fierce nomadic instinct that had always made her claim for herself some gipsy ancestress, and, keenly as she had often rebelled at the artificial, useless existence she lived, she knew she would find it more difficult than ever to live now.

Suddenly she looked from Billy to Walter. Between them there could be nothing save honesty in common, for neither could see the smallest value in things that the other found absolutely vital to existence. And often the over-civilisation of the one man as opposed to the over-primitiveness of the other, struck the girl keenly; for which was right—which in the man she might love would she prefer?

Walter, with his stern one-man one-woman creed, with never a wrong word to a good woman, with his courage, truth, endurance, honesty, and total lack of bodily culture and intellectual development; or Billy, with his latter-day philosophy, his subtlety, his pungent humour? Not that man, or woman either can live on humour alone. It is a sauce-piquante with which to flavour life—but it won't support it. Becky wanted something more than the delightful companion of a saunter—and a man of real humour never makes a satisfactory lover—he will see the curl papers through the curl, and be absolutely incapable of hiding from you the fact that he *has* seen them. And in some curious way, Walter's genuine earnestness discounted her own and Billy's mental sympathy with each other, and spelled as levity their keen enjoyment of things that sometimes shocked the poor pioneer. They had even had to revise their vocabulary and choice of subjects; indeed a mere allusion to a *cause célèbre* had brought down on Becky's head the crushing reproof that he didn't approve of what he called "married people's talk."

But as usual when Becky felt most deeply, she was most flippant, so now she asked Billy if he didn't think the roll

of blue serge the missus was sending out to Tolly a mere work of supererogation?

"It sets my teeth on edge to think of the contrast it will make with Tolly's supple brown skin, and I suggested a pound of tobacco, and a couple of meerschaums as a far more suitable present. Walter, haven't you more than once alluded to peaceful moments when you and your Tolly sat together smoking your pipes? And when will you see her again?"

"Not just yet. I've got to settle this little business of mine first, and it may take a year," said Walter, taking a long pull at his rum and milk.

"And you expect to find her there when you get back?" inquired Becky, with round eyes, "women don't take much on trust, you know—if I were you, I should look her up *first.* Women are wonderfully alike all the world over, whether covered by a white, a black, or a brown skin. What would you do if you found her with a new young man?"

"Kill him," said Walter instantly. "and with as little compunction as I'd kill a seal."

Becky jumped, but his mother put out her hand gently, and laid it on his hard-working one, and her intensely blue, wise eyes dwelt fondly on this best-beloved of her seven sons, counting every moment of the little time that his company was left to her, tasting her joy to the uttermost as the young can never do.

Without a word, she sat in her simple dignity, with her yearning heart, and its great thoughts; . . . no wonder that the old are so silent, so uncommunicative, they are so

because they know everything; and a lifetime would not be long enough in which to tell it, nor would the young listen. So they are silent, and the wisdom dies with them; only if *we* live to be old, we shall know it, and be as lonely as they have been.

And Billy on a sudden saw the primal simplicities of life focussed under his eyes—the elemental forces of a mother's pain and devotion, man's lot to toil and wander, and in striking contrast, Becky, the unwon maiden, the one eternal poem of life that binds hope to the heart of man, and snatches his eyes away from the world-old tragedy of the Madonna and her son.

An overwhelming sense of the true inwardness of life flooded his heart, and for a few moments the *drôle*, the *flâneur* who had made a cult of amusement, and brutal humour his god, was swept clean away, and he was natural man; . . . he thought of his own mother, that delightful *mondaine* who had trained, and made him what he was; . . . she could never look like that simple dame yonder, with the silky grey hair parted on the beautifully modelled head, or know that expression on the clear oval of the wrapt face, and Becky, watching him, was uneasy, for she had been resolutely fighting the lover, encouraging the comrade in him for years.

"Walter," she said briskly, "has been getting ready for departure. He is morally certain to lose Tolly's blue serge and his new shirts, and the rest of it—but one thing he has *not* neglected to do, and that is, to hunt up the red and black comforter without which he never attempts a voyage or journey of any kind, and when he

found it—washed, it is true—and therefore at a disadvantage (though time will mend that), he concerned himself with packing no more."

Billy pulled himself together with a shake, and got up to go. He looked grave, and not at all amusing, as he bid the pioneer a warm farewell, and Becky, paying him the unwonted honour of seeing him to the door, stamped her foot like a little fury on the other side of it.

"If you are going to take life in earnest, Billy," she said spitefully, "you had better give up diplomacy and take to spectacles—after all, I believe it is your eyeglasses we laugh at, not you."

. . . . . .

And now had come the last evening; the kit was packed, the shirts and other comforts were inside it, the last good-night spoken between Becky and the boy, and then the missus and he had their little spell of time together, and her eyes took their fill of feasting upon what, on the morrow, would not be there, . . . and then there was only sleep to come, and after that, farewell.

And if, when at last he lay on his bed in an uneasy slumber, his seven-leagued boots at its foot, his mother stole in, and sat beside him in darkness through the long cold hours till morning, who shall call her foolish, or deny her right to that tender and sorrowful watching? For there is no hopelessness like the grief of age, when it makes its last long farewell to what it loves, knowing that it will meet, and look upon youth no more.

It was in the murky gloom of a black November fog, his labouring lungs vainly struggling against it, that next

morning, Walter formed the centre of one of those little groups at Waterloo Station which, when a Cape steamer is departing, are so profoundly tragic to the looker-on, even though smiles, not tears, are in the ascendant.

"Good-bye! Good-bye! God bless you, my glorious old mother! God bless you, Becky!" Another embrace —another—a sob—and now the door is shut, the whistle sounds, the swaddled-up figure blocks out the window, and the poor pioneer has started to recapture, from surf-bound coast and sandy desert, the great fortune in search of which so many ships had beat up and down those desolate seas, so many human beings searched painfully for thousands upon thousands of years in vain. But what if Fate had decreed that this pigmy human being, matching his puny strength against Nature, who so long and well had kept watch and ward over her secret, save for his and a Hottentot's covert peep at it, should never look with mortal eyes upon it again? For there was the great fortune to which he alone knew the road, and over here were eager ones who longed to reap it; and betwixt the two stood the life of one perishable man.

CHAPTER V

"Waste not your Hour, nor in the vain pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute:
Rather be jocund with the fruitful grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter fruit."

"QUEKETT says he can't get the smell of rum and milk out of the house," said Jane Pomeroy, who was a plain woman with big sagacious nose, that irresistibly suggested memories of Smollett and Fielding, and a delicious voice that made you want more of her ugliness, and who, by the usual law of inconsistency, had been chosen by a connoisseur, and a man of exquisite taste in beauty of every description.

"Though lost to sight, to memory dear," murmured Becky. "Didn't I wire to you, 'Walter back. Shall I take rooms'? and didn't you reply, 'Make him comfortable in Hill Street'? and we did. But sometimes I rub my eyes, and ask, Was it a dream?" And she gazed round as if she sought to conjure up the poor pioneer and the missus, who had also folded her tent, and stolen quietly away.

The sun shone on the hyacinths and pots of lilies, and the flowers Becky was arranging. It was the morning hour when, rested by sleep and refreshed by the most satisfactory meal of the day, we are at our best and brightest, and turn with ardour to enduring that burden

of life from which we may have recoiled in disgust no longer ago than last evening.

"*I* should call it a nightmare," said Jane Pomeroy, who was a delightful study in colours, as usual, for she had very early in life recognised the fact that to be invariably dressed well and carefully is the one way to command genuine respect from young and old, rich and poor alike.

Perhaps her greatest charm was that you could not tell at first sight if she were married or single. Old maidenhood had not bleached, nor matrimony dyed her any fixed or indeterminate colour. Her drawing-rooms, which she never crowded with uninteresting minds and bodies, were uncommon too.

You stepped at once into an old-world atmosphere, where were the elegant leisure, the space, yes, and the grace of a bygone generation. Here were pause and peace, and time in which to take the proper bearing of things, and instinctively you put off your haste and fuss about trifles—after all, what did they matter? Nothing matters if you look at it from the right distance. It is only for the moment that things loom huge and unbearable, just as a hand or foot does, when placed too near the photographic lens.

Newspapers here were not the event of the day, and Jane Pomeroy would not have a telephone in her house; it struck at the liberty of the subject, she said. Her home was her own, as was her privacy, and to be rung up at any moment, by any fool who wanted to curse her, or talk drivel was an insult, and it honestly gave her the

creeps to hear voices hundreds of miles away talking into her ear.

"But I still think, my dear," said Jane, "that he might have gone to some place, and bought a ready-made suit of clothes before coming here; it's the servants, you know."

"Oh, Auntie!" burst out the girl, "how artificial, how unworthy of you! That is just what makes me hate civilisation, and the falsehood and utter *wrongness* of our lives! Can't you understand what Gray meant when he spoke of '*the pleasures of vicissitude*'? Can't you see that for Walter, a real man like that, the rotten appearances we keep up, the empty society and worse manners of it, simply do not exist? Such men as he follow the bent of their instincts, implanted in them by God long before they took to building houses, and sleeping within four walls. Except in winter I *never* would, if I could help it."

"I suppose you mean the bush, with a first-rate hotel round the corner," said Jane, "but it would not suit you at all. You would be howling for the newsboys shouting out murders, within twenty-four hours. And you've got enough vagabonds in your family already," she added significantly; "the troubles of you Bethunes began when your father objected to the shape of his brother-in-law's nose, and went to law with him. You are all spendthrifts in great and in little."

"Well, it may be a good thing to economise, to fix your whole attention on saving the few coppers or pounds you may possess, but how much better to earn, to scatter,

to help, for Nature abhors sitting still, and is always doing something; and, taking her all round, who such a glorious spendthrift as she?" cried Becky.

"It doesn't do to follow Nature too closely," said Jane.

"Yes, but she is nearly always right—and so are we, from our point of view. And anyway, we don't let the blight of other people's minds impinge on ours till we lose our own identity," said Becky. "And we have our virtues—we don't pose."

"No. Pose is, after all, a disagreeable confession of doubt in oneself, and a deference to the opinions of others, but you think far too much of yourselves to show any," said Jane Pomeroy. "You yourself are a cracker of truth, always exploding when least expected. I heard a woman call you Homocea once, because you always touched the spot. And, of course, it's a great saving of time, dealing with perfectly sincere, brutal people; life's too short for beating about the bush, and trying to find out what folks *do* mean. But you go too far. You either love a person immoderately at first sight, or you preserve a silence so insulting that one longs to box your ears. There isn't an ounce of manners in the whole of your extraordinary family, which has a knack of going to a State concert one day, and sitting down to bread and cheese and onions the next. Nothing that any of you do will ever astonish me. I only hope your brother may get a fair share of this fortune."

"It isn't the money I want, but the independence of it," said Becky. "That is why the American women have such sublime assurance. 'Thank God *I'm* all right,'

they say, and slap their pockets like the man in the play. There's an old flower man at a corner in Bond Street who calls out all day: 'Eeny mon-*nee?* Buy a flower!' Well, it's the same with life. You must have money, or you can't buy."

"Then marry," said Jane Pomeroy briskly.

"Thank you," said Becky. "Marriage is like a bag of scorpions—you *may* get a harmless cobra, or be stung to death by an adder; you never know your luck."

"H'm," said Jane. "When one is hungry, one is not too fastidious about the platter in which the meat is served; when one is not, one notices the pattern and quality of the china. You've got to fall in love yet, my girl, and a pretty set-out it will be."

"I read somewhere," said Becky, "that love is a stone fruit, and man as full of love as a pumpkin of seeds, and, naturally, they have the advantage over us. I don't want to marry a pumpkin, and oh! how hateful it is to be born a woman. In China they are perfectly frank about it, and esteem us to be of neither use, comfort, nor ornament, but merely necessary evils."

"At the present moment they are ruled over by a woman," said Aunt Jane drily; "still, my dear, I am always very sorry for women—poor creatures, who have to jump about and grin for a living, or work—or do something. Even love has to be worked uncommonly hard for, if you want to keep it, just as at any other craft or profession—nothing worth having is got without patience and skill, and after all, sometimes it's not worth the trouble."

"But you were awfully happy with Uncle Nick," cried Becky.

"Flattery, my dear, flattery! Whenever you see a man sniggering to himself in the street, depend on it, it's something *he* said, not what *you* did. Take yourself, and if you'll try to remember a few of the witty things said by the most agreeable persons you ever met, you can't recall one. They let *you* say them. They literally said nothing at all—therefore do you love them. Who are the people that we remember most fondly, those whose conduct we admire, or those who have once flattered our self-love? We will walk to the gallows beside the criminal who has believed in us, and condemn a just man who has wounded our vanity. Most women want a chorus, but they are doomed to be echoes. I said nothing at all, except what Mr. Pomeroy wanted me to say. 'It is well,' says a Moorish proverb, 'to know the truth and to tell it; it is better to know the truth, and to talk of date-stones.'"

She glanced round the rooms as one who, for an echo, had really done very well indeed. It is impossible to help feeling respect for yourself when the departed has left you everything, with no mean little reservations about future husbands, and so on.

"Yes. And then you see, my dear, I never played the fool, whatever *he* did. You can make a man's will for him, if you only fix it in his mind that you will be too heartbroken at losing him to even *think* about marrying again. It was only latterly that Nicholas got a little tiresome, when his liver took the place of a conscience,

'long lost awhile,' and never even missed, till he most unfortunately found it."

"And yet you didn't marry again, Auntie," said Becky, who was sitting with her chin in her hands, deeply interested. Fact is so much more really illuminating to the mind than wanton, bald-headed imagination.

"I suppose all men are worries, more or less," said Becky dreamily, "but what beats me is, how with the most unbounded contempt for a man, his wife will love him still. And in some places, at least, they go into matrimony with their eyes open. Now the Russian peasantry on her wedding-day crown the maiden with wormwood, signifying the *bitterness of wedlock*. It has often puzzled me, that curious look of rest you see on so many worn, middle-aged widows' faces, a look that seems to say, 'We have done with our man, tiresome, loving, selfish, we have borne with him, tended him, buried him,' they would do it all over again without a murmur, but at last the hour has come when they draw a deep breath of duty done, and then comes peace."

"How did you know that, Becky, my girl?" inquired Jane suspiciously, "you think and analyse far too much, and it isn't healthy."

And yet, whatever might be going on in the girl's mind, it was all beneath the surface, and to the world she seemed a surprisingly lively young woman, who was always near the sunshine, and took it with her wherever she went.

"Women are divided into two classes, Auntie, cats and dogs. A dog is always the wrong side of the door, either

going out or coming in—he loves an outdoor life, that's *me.* And his manners are not always gentlemanly, no more are mine. A cat is a cosy person who makes *bon mènage*, where she is, the pantry and larder are not far off, that's *you.*"

"Thank you, Miss," said Jane with spirit, and Becky went round, and tenderly kissed the top of her head and looked in her eyes, then returned to her chair to continue the argument.

"You see, Auntie," she said, "I am not of those helpless women whom men *love;* if I could be born over again, I'd choose to be absolutely helpless; when she can't do anything else, a man always takes it for granted she will know how to worship *him.* I'm not a beauty, but I'm not ugly enough to be really efficacious. An ugly wife is often the pair of blinkers that Fate claps on a man's eyes to keep him straight."

"You're wrong, Becky," cried Jane, "men, even the best of them, have funny little ways."

"Oh! Auntie," cried Becky, turning scarlet, "I was not thinking of you at all, and you know you are beautiful to those who love you."

"I don't mind in the least, my dear. Living with you is like living in the palace of Truth—mighty refreshing after that lying looking-glass, the world. And as to your marrying or not marrying—well, life with you will not be a morning stroll, but a walk through a country that keenly interests you—and you'll see dawn come up, and summer and winter, but you won't be frightened; you'll be learning all the way."

Becky nodded. Her pessimism had been forced upon her—in reality it took very little to make her happy; she had a passion for life, and no smallest detail of it ever bored her.

"Time," continued Jane, "is not for women, and if you persist in sending all the men to the rightabout, you may come to the crooked stick at last."

"The world's a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel! *My* fate is yet to come," said Becky.

"Circumstances are Fate, and accident is Providence," said Jane. "How did Billy and Walter get on?"

"First rate. When we could woo the pioneer up here (he *always* spread out a clean handkerchief before venturing on your couches), he used to sing to us—in his greatcoat, with his pot hat on." Becky stopped to go off into a sudden fit of laughter. "I beg your pardon, Auntie, but I was thinking of how once Walter would sing in the train, and I put my head out of the window, and the whole length of the carriages, there was a row of frightened people hanging out, their silly eyes all staring our way because they thought murder was being done in our compartment!"

"You let your sense of humour override everything," said Jane indignantly. "You seem proud that your brother has gone to bits before your eyes, that he has forgotten every habit of civilisation and decency."

"But he hasn't," said Becky. "He is a tramp with the eyes and heart of a gentleman."

"I have often noticed," said Jane, "that cleanliness of mind goes with slovenliness of person."

"Did I tell you he was married?" said Becky; "marriage over there is a much more moral institution than here—they stay together so long as they *keep true*."

"My dear," said Jane drily, "one may get as tired of virtuous customs and people, in the long run, as of vicious ones." Then realising what she had said, looked shocked, but declined to hedge, only changed the conversation.

"It was very nice of Billy," she said, "to be kind to Walter."

She glanced across at the clean lines of the girl's wonderful figure, then at the mischievous little face across which flitted expressions vivid and changing as shadow clouds on the sea. And Jane sighed. It stops your breath sometimes to look at a young thing whose life is all before it, while yours is all behind you.

"There is nothing so fatal to one's self-respect as too little love," she said, "indeed it's positively ensavaging."

"Schiller knew what he was talking about when he said, that 'while philosophers are disputing about the government of the world, hunger and love are performing the task,' my dear. The perfect life for a woman to live is love; the greatest happiness for a man is the conquest of himself. And love is like salt at table, you don't notice it, but you miss it if it isn't there. You'll *have* to put salt in your food, my girl, or you'll never know the real flavour of life. And there's no excitement or pleasure in life possible to women without men. You may be very fond of a woman friend, but she is a poor thing when you want a stout arm to protect you, and

while a man's oddities only make you laugh, hers will often make you weep."

"I like Billy much better than Féo, if that is what you mean," said Becky.

"Well, my dear," said Jane, "I don't believe in girls having bosom-friends. It is like a full paper-case with stamped envelopes handy to the woman who has a knack of libel, and writing scandalous reports of everybody. There are many things you can say to a man that would be indecent to a woman, and the man honourably forgets them—the women don't. And pray, did Féo see Walter?"

"No. She went south the very day the pioneer came. And I was so sorry—I wanted to watch the effect he would have on her."

"Thank you, Becky. My husband's family don't happen to be savages, but I never expect you to consider me in the least."

"No, I only love you," said Becky, "but why don't you love *her* best? After all, Auntie, she'll never go mad, as perhaps I shall, for she hasn't a brain to go out of! But her outside is all right—*that* is always a joy for ever. And I love those brown dog's eyes of hers —you know what I mean."

"What was she wearing?"

"A few yards of ermine—narrow—some lace, and I think there was some velvet somewhere, and an aigrette, and a muff disguised in violets—and she was all hung round with chains; you see, Auntie, all the aristocrats are so slim—and the vicious ones the slimmest, and they

must cover up the nakedness of the land somehow—yet they manage to produce exactly the right effect, which is that poor outsiders like me can't possibly see how it's done! But slender they *must* be—nowadays, to be fat is almost to bear the convict-mark of virtue."

"Becky!" cried out Jane angrily.

"They're just made up of odds and ends, Auntie—scrappy like their morals—and you're afraid a working man, the only really good judge alive of a woman's looks, wouldn't hesitate to call them rag-bags. Féo shouldn't wear ermine," and Becky frowned, for she herself had a natural instinct for clothes, and correct taste in colours. "A lily looks its worst placed against snow—only the greatest artist of all would have thought of backing it with that particular shade of green leaf. A woman with sable tints in her hair looks best in sable; only a black-eyed, black-haired, rosy-cheeked, white-skinned woman can stand ermine, grey-blue eyes and blue eyes go exquisitely with chinchilla, and the woman who can look smart in an unadulterated sealskin coat, has yet to be born. Well, Féo and her kind have the best of everything, there is not a pleasure, a distraction that is not theirs; and they have their own ten commandments, and hold themselves responsible to nobody, yet almost every one of them is trembling and shaking with fear, as she listens for the knock of the sheriff's officer at her door."

"What?" cried Jane Pomeroy sharply.

"The moral sheriff's officer, I mean—because any day, in their outrageousness, and extravagance, and vices they

may have gone so far as to forfeit their position, though that's difficult enough to those who are born."

"I hope you are not including Féo in your sweeping indictment," said Jane significantly.

"No, not Féo. I was not speaking of unmarried women. But I would never," went on the girl warmly, "sit down as Féo does, and wait patiently for a man who prefers to wander half the world over before he condescends to come home and marry me!"

"She adores him. I never saw Lord Moray, you know, but Mary Chiltern says Féo has no will of her own when he is by."

> "Ne'er a peevish boy
> Would break the bowl from which he drank in joy,"

quoted Jane, "unless he happened to be a Bethune."

"I wonder what his attraction is?" said Becky with unusual persistence.

"My dear, if not a woman-hater, he is a man absolutely indifferent to women, and in all ages it is the ascetic, the man who can altogether do without us, that we women irrevocably love. *This* man's idol is sport."

"He might have a worse one," said Becky, who had strong opinions on the subject. "Well, it's lucky he's got *something* he likes, poor hostage of Fortune."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that nowadays, when you marry your daughters to the richest men who will buy them, and put your son in pawn to free your estate, as that rascally old Lord Shotterbourne is doing, your children are very valuable

hostages to Fortune indeed. And Féo will make a charming pawnbroker, and no doubt wrap her deposit in cotton-wool, but her husband will have to pay interest in one way or another, and a *real* man wouldn't do it to save a good father, let alone a bad one. But, thank Heaven, Féo didn't bring Cleopatterer——"

"Why will you call Lady Surrenden by such a ridiculous name?" said Jane Pomeroy. "One of these days you'll do it to her face."

"Well, doesn't she ape Cleopatra with her silly, conquering airs and graces? and it does discount poor Féo so. Billy said she was prattling the other day about all she had looked and done when she was sixteen, when Slingsby Wetherell got on to his feet, and throwing out his arms to the company, cried in a great, lamentable voice: "Good God! what have I *done* to be brought here to see such a *fool?*' and walked out, leaving the poor woman who had introduced him to follow."

Jane Pomeroy laughed, for Slingsby was six feet two in his socks, and broad in proportion, and the effect his conduct produced must have been colossal.

"Yet her husband left her a rich woman, and her daughter a million," she said. "He was fond of her too. But poor Celia always laced too much. Now a woman's manners depend so much on her stays. If they are too tight, she is jerky, almost hysterical, and fidgets everybody. Depend upon it, Phryne, Sappho, and Mme. Récamier owed half their charm to being comfortable. But I wish Féo was not so in love with this young man. It is always the man who loves a woman too much who

loses her; he is not cruel enough, and the same with a woman, if *she* loves a man too much, she can't influence him at all."

"I like her for her devotion to him," exclaimed Becky. "I suppose it is his strength that appeals to her."

"My dear," said Jane, "when will you learn that strength does not hold us? We rebel, we resent coercion, and fight ourselves loose; it is *weakness* in man or child that appeals to the angel in us."

"There is no angel in *me*," said Becky, grimacing, "and I *love* strength. Now Billy is refreshing, but Walter calls him an indoor chap, and it sticks in my mind. It's the outdoor man I love."

"And is poor Billy's day over, like the rest of your lovers?" said Jane indignantly, but with surprise, because Becky liked very few people. And if we studied our chance acquaintances as oil-paintings instead of mere silhouettes, what time should we have for ourselves and intimates? It would be to spend our whole lives in a wearying picture-gallery.

"Dear Billy," said Becky affectionately. "Well—Féo is welcome to her ascetic—*I* prefer a man who makes me laugh. Beauty withers, riches flee (I'm sure ours did!), Love dries up, but Humour never faileth. You can get tragedy by the bucket—*any* fool ca... e tragic—but a Dan Leno, an Eddy Payne, and a George Giddens are joys for ever, and statues of gold ought to be reared to them. Life from a humorous point of view is the *only* one that is bearable, and shows in its true proportions, and if it makes you rather brutal—well, life *is* brutal, and you can't

alter it. So down with tragedy, and let us read our 'Many Cargoes' with a thankful heart, and pray for more, though without much hope, for our brightest dogs are apt to become dull as ditch-water after success! Isn't it a pity that good men (and she made a face) are so lamentably deficient in the sense of humour?"

"But their banking accounts are usually better," said Jane.

"Yes," said Becky. "Only—is humour compatible with real love? *His* I mean—not mine. Love!" she cried impatiently, "I want none of it—and I will have none. It requires the noblest order of man to see a woman at his feet—and not kick her."

"Don't you think, my dear," said Jane drily, "that men are quite as disappointed in us, as we are in them? And we all talk big about what we are going to do (otherwise what we would like to do), and we all do what we have *got* to do."

Becky nodded.

"Did not the elegant Addison say long ago, 'Love is a short-lived passion, that immediately decays upon growing familiar with its object, unless it be fed with fresh discoveries, and kept alive by a new perpetual succession of miracles rising up to its view'?"

"There's the luncheon gong," said Jane, "and perhaps, my dear, you'll allow me to eat my meal in peace. If love is nowadays the bugbear of the young, indigestion still remains the terror of the old."

CHAPTER VI

"And this I know; whether the one true Light
Kindle to love, or wrath consume me quite.
One flash of it within the Tavern caught,
Better than in the Temple lost outright."

BILLY was in the deepest of dumps, and with reason. An Attaché may have a pleasant enough position, but he is liable to be sent to the ends of the earth at a minute's notice, and this one had that morning received orders to go to Berlin, and would certainly be absent some weeks. So he sat stirring his tea as if it were a cup of cold poison, and looking across at Becky, to whom he had come to say good-bye, and who seemed rather to enjoy his going, like the heartless jade that she was, only imploring him to come back more amusing than he went.

"One can't always be jingling one's caps and bells," he protested, and she threw him a swift glance, for it had begun to dawn on her that under those bells was a big heart and brain that she might have to reckon with some day. Meanwhile, he made her laugh, and brought her books which she afterwards discussed with him, and to-day she plunged into "Ben Hur," which she had just finished, though he entreated her to talk to him instead.

"Listen," she said. "It is the story of Ne-ne-hofra, a maiden so beautiful, that from all parts of the world princes came to woo her, but they all went away dis-

consolate, each saying, 'I have seen her, and she is not a woman, but Athor herself.' Now there was at Memphis an old Ethiopian king, and when his wife died, he was inconsolable, till one came to him and said, 'O Orœtes, I am astonished that one so wise and great should not know how to cure a sorrow like this.'

"'Tell me a cure,' said the king. And the man told him of Ne-ne-hofra, who had refused many princes and kings; but who could not say no to Orœtes? In a barge richer than Cleopatra she came, attended by an army of barges little less rich, and all Nubia and Egypt and a myriad from Libya lined the tented shores to see the cortège pass. Wafted by perfumed winds and golden oars, through a lane of sphinxes and double-winged lions she was borne, and set down before Orœtes, who sat on a throne specially erected at the sculptured pylon of the palace, and Ne-ne-hofra was queen of all queens. But he wanted love, and a queen happy in his love; and showing her all his treasures, he cried, 'O Ne-ne-hofra! but kiss me in love, and they are all thine!' And thinking that she *could* be happy if she was not then, she kissed him."

Becky paused, and looked up at Billy lying back in his chair and watching her; the room was very still, and warm, and intimate.

"The first year she was happy, and it was very short; the third year she was wretched, and it was very long; then she was enlightened; that which she thought love of Orœtes, had been only daze of his power. The roses in her cheeks turned to ashes, she had long spells of tears,

gradually but certainly she faded, and was given over to die. Orœtes sent for his master sculptors and painters of Memphis to work on her crypt, but he passionately besought her to tell him of what ailment she was perishing before his eyes. 'You will not love me any more if I tell you,' she said in doubt and fear. But he swore by Osiris that he would only love her the more . . . and she bade him send for Mempha, her teacher and guardian, who would find the cure for her affliction."

Billy moved slightly. He guessed what was coming, though he had never read "Ben Hur," and a little colour came into Becky's face as she went on with the story.

"Mempha came. To the King he said, 'The Queen, like every other mortal, is paying the penalty of a crime. Ne-ne-hofra grew up under my eyes, and confided every incident of her life to me, among others that she loved the son of her father's gardener, Barbec by name. With that love in her heart, O King, she came to you, and of that love she is dying.' The King went out and gave two orders. One was that Barbec should be immediately brought to Memphis, the other that a floating island should be constructed bearing a temple, a palace, a garden, to go wheresoever the winds might blow it. Then to the Queen he said, 'Be of cheer, I know all, and have sent for Barbec; you shall have him to yourself, and he you to himself, nor shall any disturb your loves for a year.' She kissed his feet . . . and the roses came back to her cheek, the scarlet to her lips, the laugh to her heart. And for one year Ne-ne-hofra and Barbec the gardener floated as the winds blew, on the island of

Chemnis, which became one of the wonders of the world; never a home of love more beautiful; one year, seeing no one, and existing for no one but themselves. Then she returned in state to the palace in Memphis.

"'Now whom lovest thou best?' asked the King. She kissed his cheek and said, 'Take me back, O good King, for I am cured.'

"Orœtes laughed, saying, 'Then it is true, as Mempha said, ha, ha, ha! it is true, the cure of love is love.'

"'Even so,' she replied.

"Suddenly his manner changed and his look became terrible.

"'*I* did not find it so,' he said.

"She shrank affrighted.

"'Thou guilty!' he continued. 'Thy offence to Orœtes the man, he forgives; but thy offence to Orœtes the King remains to be punished.'

"She cast herself at his feet.

"'Hush!' he cried. 'Thou art dead!'

"He clapped his hands, and a terrible procession came in—a procession of *parachistes* or embalmers, each with some implement of his loathsome art.

"The King pointed to Ne-ne-hofra.

"'She is dead. Do thy work well.'"

Billy started to his feet, Becky was very pale, and she trembled.

"Isn't it ghastly?" she said, "and the most horrible thing of all is, that it's true that the cure of love is love—that love is love's curse—that we cannot be happy without it, that we are miserable with it, and must flee

it, lest we be embalmed alive as poor Ne-ne-hofra was, and as many a woman silently is, whom we meet in the world with a smile on her lips while the tools are doing their cruel work out of sight."

"Becky! Becky!" cried Billy, deeply moved; his eyeglass had fallen, and with it his absurdity, but she was alarmed at what she saw in his face, and shut the lid down sharply on her emotions. She never dared to let any one approach that deep within deep that she instinctively knew was despair, and recklessness, and ruin; she had always been able to hide, under a cloak of indifference, her real turbulent self from every one, save perhaps Jane Pomeroy, and she was furious at affording Billy this unexpected glimpse into her character.

"The fog has upset me," she said, "and the story, you know. I either weep or rage when I can't breathe properly."

Billy shook his head.

"It would do you all the good in the world to fall in love," he said, "it might make you human—I sometimes wonder if you are quite that."

"I'd rather be inhuman and happy, than human and embalmed," said Becky drily. "When a woman's heart aches nowadays, she does not sit down and bewail herself, she goes out on her bike, or rows, or plays tennis—("I *hate* an athletic woman," put in Billy vehemently). She does not lie abjectly at man's mercy as grandma did—man is a *part* of her life, not the whole life now. Did Byron live to-day he would blush for her 'whole existence' theory—and a good job too. And poor Cupid,

who paraded originally in the earliest Greek myths as a strong young man or ruthless warrior armed with a heavy axe with which he struck to some purpose—even to the slaying of his victim—has degenerated into a little boy with a little toy, and an assortment of undersized arrows."

"But they hurt all the same," said Billy, and Becky looked at him resentfully; it was maddening to see even that precious gift, humour, being swamped by so plentifully common a thing as love.

She got up from her chair, and moved restlessly about the room, stopping at last before a statue of the Venus of Milo, half seen in a grove of palms.

"Look at her!" she said. "She couldn't write books or flap up and down Fleet Street as a lady journalist—she couldn't hug, she couldn't bike, but you could *hear* her, and you could love her; and now, after being the exquisite type of rest, purity, and peace, for ages and ages, some wretches are agitating to supply her with arms. If we only knew it, probably it was a man who cut them off, that she might never do any of those unfeminine things his soul hated, that she might always be helpless, adored, protected, as we women nowadays are not."

"You won't let us," exclaimed Billy, "and your arms are lovely, and I don't want them off."

Becky looked at him. He had been very good to the Pioneer and to her lately; and, often cruel to him, she was sometimes kind, and let him look sheer into the real truth and tenderness of her heart.

And Billy's heart contracted; Becky could be so sweet, so womanly when she chose, and she was lovely then in some indescribable way that she kept only for those she intimately knew and liked.

"I wonder," she said hastily, for he looked dangerous, "if she had blue eyes? I think I must have been a man in a former state, and had black ones, for whenever I see a blue-eyed woman, I always want to take off my hat and say '*Thank you!*' Isn't it odd that ugly, *little* people always have such huge families, and tall, beautiful people very small ones?"

The subject did not interest Billy.

"When I look at *your* eyes I say, 'Thank God!'" he remarked.

"We don't know how to keep still, or how to wait, as our grandmothers did," she said, "we live in express trains and talk in telegrams"

"Were they any better than we are?" said Billy. "I doubt it. Were they any happier?"

"Certainly. Nearly all of us live an outside life, and put our best energies and sympathies into it—and there is very little left over for home consumption."

"You and Mrs. Pomeroy are no gad-abouts."

"But we do gad. And I shall miss my frivols with you frightfully. Don't you know some casual you can recommend to amuse me while you are away?"

At that moment the door opened, and Quekett's polished tones announced—

"Mr. David."

Every day you meet in the streets numbers of such

African-bronzed, thorough-bred young men, as Walter's friend; they have cost their mothers endless anxiety and trouble, but they are of the stuff of which England is made, who fight and carry on her glories, and push her prestige in every quarter of the world, and who love the "bright face of danger" beyond that of any woman upon earth.

"You are very welcome," said Becky, moving swiftly to meet him, and then she seemed enveloped in a sudden brightness, and that first impression of him as a young sun-god, swift to leap, to run, and to wrestle, always remained in her mind.

"Walter gave me this letter months ago for you," he said, and handed to her a shabby envelope scrawled over in round hand, "but I hear he is himself in England;" and he glanced about the room, as if under one of those elegant gilt-legged couches, or graceful courting chairs, so sparsely scattered about, the Pioneer might have managed to hide himself.

"He sailed a fortnight ago. He often spoke of you," said Becky. And then she remembered that she had not introduced Billy. The two men nodded, and they all sat down.

"We must have passed each other at sea," said Mr. David, looking disappointed. "Had he on his red and black comforter?" he added, laughing; "no one would know him without it. And, indeed, if I had never seen it, I should not be talking to you now. Didn't he tell you?"

"No, only that you hunters of big game are the finest pioneers in all Africa."

"That's just like him. I was dying of thirst and fever in the desert, when his colossal boots happened to pass that way, and he just picked me up on his back, and carried me many miles to a doctor, and thought nothing of it; he is always doing trifles of that sort," he added, looking keenly at Becky, who was a great surprise to him, though in point of fact he knew as little about the Pioneer's family as Walter knew about his.

"I heard of Walter's wonderful find as I came through Cape Town," he went on; "but it's still more marvellous how Walter and that Hottentot lived to tell the tale of it. To start on that walk across the desert, not knowing if they would find a drop of water, wants a bit of doing. My God! if you knew that thirst! But those two tottering figures stumbled on till they were able to quench it."

"And he has been thirsty ever since," said Becky ruefully. "But he did not really care for his rum and milk—it was only a stop-gap."

"Is the stuff he has found very disagreeable?" inquired Billy.

"No; it is not disagreeable at all. Very different to Peru," he added, laughing, "where the Chinese, doomed to shovel a deposit of guano into ships, own that in the fierceness of its heat, the horror of its stench, and the utter damnation of those compelled to labour at it, they get an idea of hell that no Hebrew, Irish, or even Scotch method of appeasing the anger and satisfying the vengeance of the awful gods, ever arrives at."

Becky laughed, though for some strange reason her heart was heavy.

"And *is* he happy?" she said wistfully. "When you have next to no wants, I suppose a fortune is not of much use to you."

"It is the life he likes best," said David absently. "I think there must be wandering blood in the veins of your family. 'What is sucked in with the mother's milk runs out in the shroud,' they say, and after all, what is glory to him? Health and freedom are much more. There are no complications in *his* path—he and his Tolly sit and smoke their pipes together, and are happy."

"You have seen her?" cried Becky eagerly.

"I have *heard*," he said, laughing, "and that sometimes she is in a Bakongo mood——"

"What is that?"

"Well, among the Bakongo suicide is very frequent, and attributed to anger, an emotion they feel very powerfully. A man will get angry with relations, angry with himself, things will not go with him as they should, he thinks, so one day in a fit of rage he kills himself, and his friends placidly remark: 'Poor fellow, he got angry and made away with himself.' Now, don't get angry," he added laughingly, "because you won't be so lucky as the potentates over there, who, when they die, have their wives and a lot of slaves decapitated to accompany them to the other world and add prestige to their spiritual retinue."

Becky laughed.

"I'm afraid there's no poor girl alive who could trust one of her lovers to die for the pleasure of escorting her," she said.

"They have also," said David, "a simple and child-like way of curing people who become uppish and discontented with their walk in life. They do not allow them to continue treading a path that proves a weariness of the flesh to them—the pot becomes their destination, and into it they go, their whims ceasing to afford food for conversation, as their bodies agreeably satisfy the appetites of their friends."

"What a pity we cannot establish a pot here," she said. "What a lot of us would go in. And how much more elbow-room there would be for those who are left."

"And you would not be one of them," he said, looking at her keenly; "here as there, life is for the strong and powerful; for the weak, indifference and cruelty. When men drop on the caravan road, the caravan goes on, but, after all, if the journey of life stops a little earlier or a little later, what matters?"

"I pity those poor devils," said Billy, and David felt irritated, but Becky's eyes told him she looked at the matter quite differently.

"Don't," he said curtly, "the savages—or what we are pleased to call the savages, in our cheap wit—appreciate their beautiful country, and are happy. True independence consists in finding out what things one *can* do without, and going without them; and the position of these savages is infinitely superior to that of the lower classes of the civilised world, for their wants are few, and easily satisfied. Their rivers abound with fish, game is easily to be trapped in the forests"—David shook his

head at this, for he was a true sportsman—"materials for canoe-making and hut-building are close at hand, the genial sun warms them by day, and their cosy camp-fire by night, while no care for to-morrow's victuals, no heart-breaking prospect of misery in coming winter for want of food and shelter, for one moment disturbs their dreams. Savages! They got the kernel of life, the civilised men the husk."

"That is what Walter says," cried Becky.

"Yes, they are cheery devils—these full African natives—with a total lack of the white man's morbid horror of death. It is inevitable—the Great Thief may come early or late—but come he must to all, and meanwhile, his motto is: 'Get all the fullest and noisiest enjoyment you can out of life.' Under the most hopeless circumstances they will dance and sing as if in a triumphal procession—and their maddest, merriest sprees are either just before, or just after a battle in which they know half their tribe will fall. Who shall say they have not philosophy—and that of the right sort? These savages in real essentials are at one with the wisest men who have ever lived."

Quekett came in with fresh tea. Becky poured it out, and gave him teacake.

"The first I have seen for ages," he said with boyish pleasure. "And what a jolly room," he added, for he hated too much furniture, and overcrowding of useless things, and looked with a sense of real refreshment at the dim green of the brocade, at the harmony of colour that suggested a woodland, dear to his heart, at the

purity and the space of it all, and he thought how completely out of it the poor Pioneer must have felt. Then his glance fell on Billy, who with his eye-glass had resumed his mirth-provoking characteristics, and quite unconsciously obeying the universal law, Mr. David smiled, then looked at Becky.

But Billy stirred uneasily, for these two were already *en rapport*, and by all his gods he cursed the profession that took him away at that particular time. He noticed that Becky did not as usual say the little sharp things that slew sentiment, and destroyed ideals, and perhaps this might be set down to the sunny charm that, in some unaccountable way, Mr. David diffused about him; indeed there was something exhilarating about this young man, as one more used to command than obey, to the best of everything the world afforded rather than its second best; and the girl had already noted that Billy, gentleman though he was (and a man can be nothing better), felt himself show to positive disadvantage beside this friend of Walter's.

"I seem to have met you somewhere," said the young Attaché, with some persistence of manner.

"Really," said Mr. David, without speculating as to where.

"Can a man call his face his own when each day he meets doubles—or originals of which his is a decidedly bad copy?" said Becky, feeling that coldness in the air; "it's irritating enough not to be able literally to call your soul your own—but merely an heirloom upon which each near and remote ancestor has engraved something you don't

want—without relinquishing all right to the shape of your nose."

David's mouth twitched. He was clean shaven, and had a characteristic mouth that turned up at the corners, promising genuine fun.

"I never saw any one the least like Mr. Carrington," he said. Then they talked of Walter, of his pride in arms and legs, of his kind-heartedness, as much in excess as his bravery, his goodness; and many simple, noble traits to which only a Thackeray could do justice; and his absolute truthfulness and high moral character, so that men going a long distance would leave their wives in Walter's charge, and woe betide the lovers who came sneaking round after them when once they were under his wing. For with all this inherent gentleness, was a fierce truculent spirit that made fighting the most natural thing in the world to him, whether with his own fist, or with weapons of slaughter; and injustice or meanness of any kind would make it flash at you out of his queer-coloured eyes, which were neither green, brown, nor blue, but a little of all three.

Mr. David searched in vain for a resemblance between the brother and sister; and long afterwards, trying to recall his first impressions of her, he could only remember that Becky did not strike him as a great beauty—only as natural, womanly, and delightful—a girl who made the time fly. And yet—if she had been ever so little a flirt, the inherent charm of her would have vanished, for those true eyes were not meant for deceit and lies, and the absolute sincerity of her outweighed a multitude of faults.

"The first time you see Becky Bethune," said a clever

man about her once, "and you don't happen to interest her, you won't think her even good-looking. The second time, if she talks to you, and likes you, you'll think her lovely. And the third—you'll fall in love with her." Which was precisely the thing that had happened unto Billy, and many others.

"We tried to amuse Walter," said Becky, and stopped abruptly. Billy had taken him to a music-hall one night, but Walter returned post haste. To him a woman was a mother, a sister, or a wife, not a thing to be jeered at, and his manliness had revolted at the sights there, and he walked straight out.

"What Walter most enjoyed was what he called a 'palaver,'" she said. "What is a real one like, over there?"

"Oh, very like a row between counsel over here. A native who has a grievance assembles his tribe, and holding in his hand small pieces of split bamboo, caps each point against his opponent by placing one on the ground before him. When he has stated the leading facts and main points of his story, there is a long line of pieces of wood before him, and if presently he is driven to refer to past matter and speech, he picks up the stick referring to the subject, and lays it down in the same place again when he has exhausted his points. Then some speaker on opposite side objects — possibly with reference to Kinkala's pig, or Umbali's fowl, which Lumba stole, or is accused of stealing, and when stick referring to fowl is lifted, Lumba steps in with 'No—no—not that one,' and, seizing another stick, deals with a totally different

part of discussion. He relates how speaker's own cousin walked off Lumba's broiled rats and lumps of sugar-cane last market-day, and tries to get up counter-charge against him, till the sticks representing pig, and fowl, and rats and sugar-cane get hopelessly muddled up, and loud murmurs of indignation from friends number one, force number two to retreat to his own side, leaving the unfortunate orator to endeavour to arrange bamboo sticks in proper order, and put pig and fowl back into their places in foregoing narrative. He presently avenges himself for interruption by going over the whole story again from the beginning, dated from very earliest times, and referring to remote ancestors—and were it not that his opponent is able ultimately to reinflict the whole tale with compound interest, referring to this very interruption and his reply, he could not undergo and support life!"

Becky laughed.

"I'm glad you've not lost your sense of humour," she said; "most of the people who come from there are terribly devoid of it."

"Yes," said David slowly, "South Africa is not conducive to humour; hunger, thirst, peril of all kinds—peril where you haven't even time to think, but must strike, rightly or wrongly, on the instant—are apt to knock levity out of you."

He jumped up at last, and looked at his watch with evident unwillingness, then asking permission to call again, went quickly away, while Becky, standing in the middle of the room, looked at the door through which he had passed, with sparkling eyes.

"I like men who *do* things," she said, "and never talk about them. Did you notice how shy he was of speaking of himself? One gets sick of words—words—words, they are but a crackling of thorns beneath the pot; they begin in nothing, end in nothing; while action—doing things—gives me a thrill. Even when talking scandal, Billy, haven't you seen people stop, agape, suddenly feeling the *nothingness* of what they are doing, and unable to go on?"

"We can't all do things, although we should all like to," said Billy. "But I seem to know that man's face—where have I met him?"

"And it's a shame," cried Becky, "a shame for a man to have that hair—all close ripples catching the light, and yet kept as short as possible! And he's as hard as bronze, and as supple as steel. Don't you think that the man who exercises all his muscles, who works one emotion in with another, does not cultivate *one* at the expense of the rest, makes a better——"

"Animal," suggested Billy, who was only human after all.

"I like animals," said Becky, "they are healthy and clean—there is no warp about *them*—and what are most of us highly civilised people but warped creatures, more or less? And the warp shows most in us women. We are no longer feminine, gentle, charitable; we snatch at new pleasures, and have no use for them when we have got them; we do not love enough, we demand all, and give nothing——"

She stopped abruptly, for Billy looked glum; he feared

this stranger dropped from the skies at Becky's feet while she was still warm with the revolt against civilisation that Walter's primitive life and manners had evoked in her, and he knew that the rise and fall of a woman's beauty springs ever from the heart, and Becky had never looked more intensely alive, more desirable, than she looked at that moment.

He sighed, and his face would have ruined any errand on which he went as a diplomatist, as he said—

"Promise me one thing, Becky, that if you won't marry *me*, you'll promise to marry no other man before I come back."

"Honest Injun," said Becky, and in solemn witness laid her hand in his. "My poor boy, don't you know by this time, that it's only the people who don't know my wickedness, who ever want to assume the responsibility of me? Directly they *do* know, they run."

But Billy knew better. It was always Becky that ran.

"I'd rather have you with all your faults (that I can't see), than any other woman crammed to the teeth with all the virtues," he said.

Becky was touched, and gave him one of those rare looks that men had been heard to say was worth a king's ransom.

"Come back as quick as you can, Billy," she said, "I shall miss you horribly." But when he had kissed her hand, and departed, she stood looking musingly down on her rosy palm.

"Mr. David would never have done that," she said.

CHAPTER VII

"Some for the glories of this world, and some
Sigh for the prophet's paradise to come;
Ah, take the cash, and let the credit go,
Nor heed the rumble of a distant drum."

JANE POMEROY was a philosopher, and when she found that she could not manage her servants, she threw up the sponge with a good grace, and let them, or rather Quekett at their head, manage her.

For though she was always game for a quarrel with one of her own class, the impudence of servants reduced her to a jelly—her knees wobbled, she talked fast, and lost her dignity, which, of course, greatly delighted and encouraged them. The more servants you have, and the more you pay them, the more trouble they are; possibly it is the vast quantities of food and drink they consume that make them so outrageously saucy; but with Quekett at the helm, Jane concerned herself with them no more, having long ago taken Omar Khayyám for her prophet, "who, not finding any Providence but destiny, and any world but this, set about making the most of it; preferring rather to soothe the soul through the senses into acquiescence with things as he saw them, than to perplex it with vain disquietude after what they might be."

And sometimes she would rub her nose meditatively, and say that to waste the whole of this life in getting

ready for another one that we do not even know to exist, was sheer murder of time, and so long as she could enjoy herself without hurting anybody else, she would continue to do it.

She loved her Omar, and quoted him on every possible occasion, that man of subtle, strong, and cultivated intellect, fine imagination, and heart passionate for Truth and Justice . . . who flung his own genius and learning with a bitter or humorous jest into the general River which the insufficient glimpses only served to reveal . . . pretending sensual pleasure as the serious purpose of life . . . who bragged of Wine more than he drank of it, in very defiance perhaps of that "Spiritual Wine which left its votaries sunk in Hypocrisy or Disgust."

That is why he will live in our hearts for ever, the great Omar Khayám, because he voices all our misery and despair, all the hopelessness of our search after what is hidden; because he wages, in the name of humanity, the bitter quarrel between us, the helpless

> "Pieces of the game *He* plays
> Upon this chequer-board of Nights and Days,"

and that unseen, unknown Presence that we beat our hearts out in trying vainly to approach. Let those who can, imitate him by

> "Striking from the calendar
> Unborn to-morrow and dead yesterday,"

and also in that strong, resolute facing of facts, that proud determination to wrest from Life all it may have to offer, which cannot but appeal to thoughtful, reflective

souls. Omar is not the bald-headed, wine-drinking old Materialist that the vulgar herd supposes him, only a splendidly brave man who scorns to hedge, to cry out, when met by the pitiless silence of the Final Cause.

> "There was the Door to which I found no key;
> There was the Veil through which I might not see;
> Some little talk awhile of ME and THEE
> There was—and then no more of THEE and ME."

"And depend on it, my dear," said Jane one afternoon to Becky, soon after Mr. David's arrival, as they sat in the drawing-room waiting for tea, "that if Omar Khayám were alive to-day, he wouldn't rave about a cup of wine, and his love sitting beside him in the wilderness, but be only too thankful not to be obliged to get up in the dead of night to do his own chores, and black his own boots, for if it's bad with servants, it's worse without them. And ordinary people get drunk, or keep sober—butlers have a way of their own—it is a secret known only to themselves, and inconceivable to outsiders, which enables them to conduct themselves with perfect propriety through a long ceremonial, and Quekett outbutlers them all. Except by his eyes—and often I daren't look at him for fear of what I shall see—you would never dream that anything is wrong. He gambles and bets—he comes home at all hours of the morning, but I don't inquire—Mrs. Quekett sees to that, only sometimes when they are shouting 'Winners! All the winners!' in the streets, I have seen his hand tremble in pouring out the wine."

Becky nodded. She had noticed it also.

"But to have good manners is everything. I had a maid once whose young man was angry because I went into the country during the season. Quite by accident, I saw a letter in which he said that if *I* were in the market, he should think pork would be remarkably cheap. Now Quekett is never low, and only when I stand on other people's doorsteps do I fully appreciate the distinction he confers on my own.

"At different stages of life one wants different things. My rest at nights is more to me than Quekett's morals—and he and Mrs. Quekett manage all the other servants, he sends every one of them to bed by ten o'clock. At my time of life, my dear, if you live in town, and don't take to religion, or morphia, or social success, you want to be comfortable, and that I am. As to the silver, it's as safe as in the bank. Quekett likes being his own master too well to even throw a glance at gaol. And if the basement is admirably adapted to the committal and hiding of a murder——"

"*Murder!*" cried Becky, in horror.

"Well, my dear, you see this is one of the old Hill Street mansions—if the new gimcrack ones are without room for even a ghost, and the basement is a house in itself, with endless rooms and cellars, and two or three separate ways of entrance. Quekett might almost keep race-horses there, and I be none the wiser. Of course I know I am an imaginative old idiot, but I've been reading a lot of murder cases lately, and in one of them, the ground plan of the house was exactly like this, and a man hid himself in it for months, connived at by one of

the servants, and then—he killed the person he wanted to kill—and got clean away."

"I thought you had more sense," said Becky reproachfully; "now, if I find you reading any more of that rubbish, I shall take it away from you. Isn't it hard enough for us to bring our elders up nowadays, without your making it worse for us?"

"And this present generation," said Jane, with some asperity, "that sits on its elders, will be so enraged if *their* children sit on them, that there will be a wrathful uprising, and the next generation will be spanked and put to bed, and a more decent state of things will prevail."

But Becky only laughed.

"If you think Quekett means murder, make up your mind to do without his fine manners, and let him go."

"My dear," cried Aunt Jane, in terror, "and leave me to manage those servants! I should be dead in a week. Doesn't every second woman I know come to me in tears at the way she is treated by her domestics? My house is perfectly kept, and your uncle's ghost would walk if his curios weren't properly looked after. And I can't bear new faces."

Becky nodded.

"I feel like that, too," she said; "just as you warm to some seemingly strange face in the street, and then it suddenly dawns on you it is one that you know. Now, Mr. David's face"—she paused—"somehow he does not seem to me strange, but as if I had seen him, or some one like him, before; and Billy thought he had met him too."

Aunt Jane did not look interested. Any friend of the Pioneer must be essentially rough, she thought; and Becky was far too unconventional herself to be encouraged by the society of another savage. Besides, Billy would be jealous, and after all, Billy was the man Becky ought to marry.

Jane Pomeroy was not essentially a worldly woman, she was only the widow of a worldly man; but his opinions, as many a man's will, reached out beyond the grave and influenced her still, and often to her own advantage.

She had not found the arrival of Mr. David an event of paramount importance, and she now inquired if he wore a comforter and corduroy pants, at which Becky flew in a rage, and marched about the room, with a fine flame in her cheeks and glint in her eye—a handful for whoever got her, as Billy would have admitted had he been there to hear and see.

"He wore serge, I admit," she said, "but what of that? What did dear Bobbie Burns say: 'A man's a man for a' that?'"

"Becky, my girl," said her aunt grimly, "when you've done prancing, perhaps you'll listen to a little sense! You gird at the decencies, the restrictions of civilisation, but are you fitted to lead the life of a primitive human being—your brother, for example, who has been so roughened and hardened by what he has gone through that it is almost impossible to realise that he ever had gentle blood in his veins? Elemental truths should not make you oblivious of soap and water, and you need not

shave your head because you have an idea in it. I never heard of any good coming to a pioneer yet; he is usually the body that some other man walks over to success; and for yourself, also, I should say that your tastes are cultivated, not desert ones, and that Billy would suit you considerably better than a person who would have to kill your breakfast before you got a chance of cooking it. A total absence of the refinements of life may rub out love quite as quickly as a superfluity of them, my dear, and you are no more fit than Féo to live as a savage, *with* savages."

"Oh, you may pity them," cried Becky hotly, "but they are the only truly wise. They want little; it is by the things you can do without you may gauge your riches; they have content, health, sleep; leisure in which to make friends with God through His works; the sense to realise how He loves us by the feast that He sets before us, and that only men like Walter enjoy. Why should they trouble about the best that is known and thought in the world, when they are *living* the best of it themselves?

"As to Mr. David, he merely came to deliver a letter; he left no address, he never mentioned his people—why should he? And that was over a week ago."

"I don't like his name," objected Jane. "David—David what? Even your own brother is called Mack out there, not Bethune."

"Shall we ask him?" said Becky softly, as at that moment Quekett ushered in the very person they were discussing.

Jane Pomeroy looked keenly at the approaching figure; none knew the signs of birth and breeding better than she did, and like most women, her eyes strayed to his goodly head with its level waves of crisp fairness, then noted the limber grace of his long, muscular limbs; and she smiled, thinking how beautiful masculine youth is, how fresh, how strong, how intensely lovable! Even as she put her hand in his, she felt lifted into a cleaner, more bracing air than she breathed with ordinary men, and yet she had never been a sportswoman; and here was a man frankly devoted to sport of all kinds, while the life athletic was written in capital letters all over him.

"I had hoped to call before," he said, "but since my return it has been splendid hunting weather," and Jane was keen to note that he said nothing about his people, and did not mention the shire from which he hunted, but she saw how his eyes turned to Becky as at sight of a friend, and how insensibly they drew together, and were absorbed in one another's conversation, and she rubbed her nose irritably, and thought that Billy could not possibly have chosen a worse time to be sent to Berlin.

"You see such awfully good cattle in the season," Becky was saying, as they talked horses. "One looks sharp at the horses, then at the woman behind them—and she is not recognised as a beauty if she own a sorry pair. You can always tell by them if she has made a failure, or a success of her life."

He frowned a little, as at a jarring note—clearly he hated modernity in women—then said—

"You ride, of course?"

"Where? Mother and I are very poor, you know, and live at Lavenders—and auntie," here she turned laughingly to Jane, "would not like me to ride alone in the Park. We drive out behind two fat gee-gees every afternoon, that could not bolt if they tried!"

Jane smiled, for Becky understood horses quite as well as he did—all the Bethunes had been put into the saddle almost before they could walk, a horse for every child, as Jane Pomeroy would sometimes say grimly, and now when grown up, not one horse between them.

As she sat and listened, she thought that books had probably formed a very small part of Mr. David's education, and bright though he undoubtedly was, intellectual he probably was not, which was so much to his advantage perhaps, if happiness is to rank for anything in a man's life. For in the affairs of life, book-men do not come up to the scratch. When there is anything to be done, and they are wanted, they are mostly missing. But where you do find that marvellous fusion of the passions and the intellect in a man's eyes, that in some few faces thrills you as with an electric shock, be very sure that his soul has gone through more than one hell, and that he has inadequately bartered his *joie de vivre* for a profound knowledge of good and evil.

Jane Pomeroy was sick to death of the decadents; listening to Mr. David, life seemed simpler, with a crowd of useless things swept like lumber from it, and she began to understand something of the spell Walter had thrown over Becky, and how from her pinhole peep in the chimney-corner the girl had looked out into the bound-

less field open to such men as Walter, and envied the vicissitudes and triumphs of their lot.

Brutal though sport may sometimes be, yet the love of sport is still one of the things that makes greatly for man's happiness, it is indeed in his very blood, and when you have watered it out, you may get the thinker, and the scientist, but you have lost the plucky fellow who believes in *living* the one life that is his, who will go anywhere and do anything, and simply does not know what fear is.

And looking at this young man, Jane unconsciously smiled, as women always did when they looked at him, but not as when they did at Billy; one was an irresponsible slacking of the risible muscles, the other admiration and fear. Possibly it was his splendid virility of look, possibly the cleanness of life which no woman fails to recognise (and love) in a man's face, but Jane felt how irresistibly youth appeals to age, for the young have all theirs before them, while the few successes, the many mistakes of the middle-aged and old are all behind them.

The Chinese proverb says: "A youth is to be regarded with respect. How do we know that his future will not be equal to our present? If he reach the age of forty or fifty, and has not made himself heard of, then, indeed, he will not be worth being regarded with respect."

Mr. David did not leave Jane out in the cold, but turned to her presently, and warmly congratulated her on having such a relative as Walter, and said she must be very proud of him, though the mischief in his eye, which met an answering flash from Becky's that revealed the poor

Pioneer sitting with his beer-jug disconsolate on a satin couch, by no means escaped his hostess's attention.

But before she could answer, Quekett came in with tea, and Becky, looking up, surprised him in a long, searching look at Mr. David that startled her; was it menace, or curiosity, or fear, or cupidity, or all four combined in one sinister illumination?

Quekett had an absurd resemblance to Mr. Pinero, a likeness he was very proud of, and carefully accentuated. There was the same slightly horsy look about him that distinguishes that exceptionally well-groomed dramatist, the same look of keen intelligence and high breeding; in short, the man had distinction, and outwardly, at least, Jane had reason to be proud of her servant.

But that look of his left a vivid impression on Becky's mind, and, all at once, there recurred to her mind Walter's strange words of warning about Mr. David, which almost marked him as a doomed man—a man apart from his fellows—and how ill luck would come to her if she associated herself with him.

Her gaiety was quenched, and as she handed him his tea, she longed to ask him to tell her the story Walter had refused, and something urged her to give him Walter's urgent message: "Drop it!" but a finer instinct came to her aid—he was enjoying his happy hour, it would be abusing the rights of hospitality to spoil it.

And yet—and yet, who shall say when the first remote warning of danger strikes on the heart and senses keen enough to receive it? Afterwards, it seemed to Becky, that the first faint footfall of that sinister presence hence-

forward to haunt the house, was heard by her then, and she never doubted that the danger was for David, not herself, or any member of the family.

She tried to talk, but her voice betrayed her; it was thin, starved; where lies helped other women out, Becky's voice invariably gave her away, and Mr. David, giving no sign that he noticed anything wrong, waited assiduously on the girl in a way oddly familiar; it was so like that of some of the best-born men who had admired her—yet in what did the difference between them and other men consist? Was it in the care they took of their women—the deference—whether they liked them or not—they displayed? For the lower you go in the social scale, the more is the woman literally the "helpmeet," who must look after herself, for certainly her man won't, although he always expects her to look after *him*.

"Poor little girl — no riding, too much indoors—you can't keep a thoroughbred shut up in a stable," said Mr. David to himself, meaning no disrespect, and soon after he went away, bidding them farewell till the next frost.

"A charming boy," said Jane Pomeroy, as the door closed behind him. "I do believe that hair of his, and his spirits, would dissipate even a London fog."

"Auntie," said Becky, "don't you think your true sportsman has more honour—observes the rules of the game of life better than men who hate sport? I don't think Mr. David could breathe in an underground life."

"Underground?"

"Yes, the life most men live to-day. It is your timid man who flinches at a scratch, and faints at a hurdle, who will break every moral law without turning a hair, so long as he is not found out."

"But, Becky, my girl," said Jane, shaking her head, "remember this, that he who bares the whole scroll of his life to the eye of every passer-by is, according to the unwritten laws of the world, a fool. Or to use a simile,—you walk down a street, it stretches straight away before you, and you observe its vista and proportions, and the people who pass you, and come and go, but down the mere slits between walls of houses that show either noisome alleys or perchance a beautiful little peep of green, you do not stop to look, you do not even realise they are there. The wide street is like that part of a man's life which he shows to the world, and the repulsive and lovely little bits are the side currents of his nature, known only to himself, or only discovered by a chance eye. Every man has such side streets in his life, and he will fiercely resent any question as to his right to them, and the wise shut their eyes to them, and elect to see him only as he walks along the high road, breasting his fellows, and from their point of view walking correctly. You will never find men, even the best and noblest of them, hard on one another, each knows his own beast too well."

"Yes," said Becky drily, "and many a woman is the umbrella held up by her husband between him and disgrace, and I'll be umbrella to no man. I couldn't walk after him, he must be good from inward forces, not kicked

to it by me. And, firstly, my husband must have distinction; and secondly, distinction; and thirdly, distinction."

"And distinction of both mind and body is rare," said Jane. "Men have funny little ways," she went on meditatively. "There are the constitutionally lazy men, who won't do anything they can possibly help; and if you pitchfork them into work they promptly die, making faces at you. There are men who cannot see a pretty housemaid without their mouths opening automatically to talk to her. Some lock up their cheque-books, and make a scene about a washing-bill, others snore, some insist on singing when they can't sing, and making you play their accompaniments, and most of them like a little romance in their lives—some one to go and see on the sly—just to vary the monotony, you know. Why does a man of a class who would not dare lift his eyes to you in the daytime, come up after dark and boldly look under your hat? Because it's an adventure—he doesn't know what he will find; it is the spirit choked out of him all day at the desk, free for the moment to do something that pleases it."

"Yes," said Becky, whom nothing made so furious as to be looked at as a mere woman—she wanted men to find her a real good fellow. "There is the sort of man that you long to hit across the face when he looks at you, and the one you can look full in the eyes, and not be ashamed of what you find there. Mr. David's eyes are like that."

"Yes," said Jane meditatively. "But don't fall in love with him, my dear. You may admire a man with-

out knowing why, and that man may be your physical affinity, but you may not be his. And one physical affinity is hell—where you get two, heaven."

"Beautiful, but rare," said Becky. "Most of the married people *I* know are legalised Siamese twins, the other half of whom each abhors. And there is always the Union in which a spinster may spend an honourable old age, with one good pal to bring her snuff. Billy will probably be an ambassador by then. Just think of the clatter his coach would make at the door!"

"Well," said Jane, "people talk of 'sorrow's crown of sorrow' being the memory of happier days, *I* think it's much worse to think that you might have been comfortable, and were not; and you would find the embassy less draughty than the workhouse. I do believe I have the flu—," and she sneezed violently. "And if so, of course, my dear, you will not receive any visitors while I am upstairs."

"Of course not," said Becky, with that light in her eyes that *might* arise from conscious inner goodness, or on the other hand be mere devilry, men were inclined to take the latter view.

And in due time the foul fiend *did* take Jane Pomeroy, and a sharp frost set in, and Mr. David called, and was admitted, for Quekett had taken him royally under his protection, and poor Jane knew it was as much as her place was worth to interfere.

CHAPTER VIII

"They well deserve to have,
That know the strongest, surest way to get."

NOVEMBER was drawing to a close, the month of fogs, but also of cosy theatre parties, little suppers, and little dinners, the time, in short, running well up to Christmas, when there is more genuine enjoyment and fun to be had in town, than in all the months of the legitimate season.

Bond Street is full of men passing through from Scotland to their hunting in the shires, and taking the opportunity to visit their tailors and bootmakers; the women are all buying winter clothes and hats, and every second man knows every second woman, and there is a sharp fusillade of recognitions, and brief exclamations in the air, for this big family of aristocrats does not waste its time in unnecessary words, but pushes strenuously on, intent only on utilising every precious moment of its life in doing something that pleases it.

David, walking down Bond Street one afternoon, seemed to own a great number of acquaintances, especially among the men of the clean, thoroughbred type, found only among the best sort of Englishmen. It has calm, aloof eyes; it has seen and done everything in the wide world worth seeing and doing, yet kept its manliness and

health, and quiet perfection of grooming and tailoring. Therefore did the young man conduct his shopping in desultory fashion, for his hat was oftener off his head than on it, and his hair and height were so unmistakable that he found himself hindered at every step, but at last he bolted down Bruton Street into Berkeley Square, though he walked slower when his feet turned, seemingly of their own accord, in the direction of Hill Street.

We are all eager, when we are happy, to put Providence off the scent, lest he hear, and David told nobody of this warm nest made for him as it were in the wilderness, where he found the congenial companionship that is dear to every heart. He and Becky had silently entered on a league, offensive and defensive, against the rest of the stupid world, left for the time being on the other side of Jane Pomeroy's front door.

He found her bright and adaptable, able to fall in with a man's mood, and spirited enough to hold independent opinions, an ideal combination in a comrade, and both were so full of spirits and snap that they had never one dull moment between them. If he very early realised that she had a rare temper of her own, and could be a perfect little devil if you took her the wrong way, that only made her the more satisfactory and interesting, and sometimes they differed and squabbled in a sharp, pungent way, at once happy and spiteful, that only ended in making them even better friends than before.

He liked the way she did her curly, dark hair, uncut, unfrizzled, woven up and around her head, with the reddish brown ends twisted above her blue eyes and small

face; from the crown of her head to her characteristic chin, it was such a little bit of sweetness and colour, but just the littleness that a strong man begins by wanting to frame in his two hands, and very often ends by worshipping.

Becky's advice to a female fool was simple: "Frill your petticoats for a man, and employ a first-rate coiffeur for the woman," but she herself did neither, and this, too, found favour in David's eyes, for he had begged her to call him David; he was more used to it, he said, and altogether they had got to know each other more intimately than if they had merely met in society for a dozen years.

To-day he shut the drawing-room door behind him with a sigh of relief and pleasure, for man's ideal of home life is the one he parts with last, and woman busied with graceful duties in her own sanctuary is as adorable as she is out of place in the muddy street.

Becky sprang up, and dropped the letter from Billy that she was reading, turning a delighted, if one-sided, countenance upon him.

"I felt blue, and sat into the fire," she said, as she pressed one hand to a scorched cheek, and then they drew in their chairs eagerly, and talked of all they had been doing since they last met, while a dangerous feeling came over the man that, since he had last seen her, he had not been enjoying himself, but merely wandering; that this was *home*, and Becky the only real friend he had in the whole world.

And the unimpaired freshness, the vitality of him, his fun, his brightness, a certain cleanly way of looking at life,

and even talking about it, almost as Walt Whitman might have done, invigorated and braced Becky mightily, though sometimes it struck her that men who have lived much in Africa have a strange indifference to sensuous attractions; perhaps they have starved so long that in some cases the instincts appear wholly eradicated, and in their breasts they carry a bundle of exploring, sporting, migratory muscles, but scarcely a heart.

Had the hard life taken it out of David, taken away the *élan*, the fire of pursuit, the delightful recklessness of the born lover, who, over a world in ruin, chases and clasps to him the woman he loves? A mere boy from Africa has lived and done in a few years, what many an old man ripe in experience has only dreamed of, and probably this complete rubbing off the bloom of ignorance rubs off the bloom of love also, though, like proved sinews, it may be tougher and more enduring in the end.

And Becky worshipped such self-restraint in the abstract, though in the flesh she had never met the man who bore within himself the force that tames a woman, and yet who was equally well able to do without her, his man's career coming first, herself a long way after, in his scheme of life.

"I want some one who is strong enough to beat me, and doesn't," Becky had once confided to Billy, and Billy, in a burst of candour, had told her he thought a beating would do her a lot of good, but he loved her too much to give it her; to which she had wryly responded—

"That means I shall love a man who will not love *me*."

Yet surely David must have had his romance. Shall

a man live always in empty rooms, waiting till Heaven pleases to send the furniture, or keep his life a clean sheet of paper on which the well-beloved shall write her name?

But if David had fished, hunted, shot, tracked big game, and practised all manly sports too sedulously ever to make him acquire the delicate gallantries of the philanderer, he yet had a way of his own with women he liked, that was altogether delightful, and made other men flat and spiritless beside him. And he had enthusiasm, which is the world's antiseptic against decay, and was always so "fit" that every trifling act was a pleasure, and now he graphically described to Becky a rousing spin of forty minutes they had had with the hounds the day before, and how the pluckiest rider in the field was Cissy Soltamore, who was just going abroad on a big game shooting expedition with her bridegroom of two months.

"Odd thing," said David, "but he was given up for lost in Africa last year, came back, and got a fearful spill in the hunting-field the very first time he was out. Now he's mended and married, and just off again with the girl of his heart; she's as plucky as he is, and that's saying a good deal. He's taking out some beagles too—a good idea that. Lots of our women are going in for that sort of life," he added meditatively, "one does it, and tells another, then they all catch fire; once they've tingled with that fierce danger, they never settle down quietly again to frocks, and will go wherever their men choose to take them. But a real good chum for a wife, one who will rough it, and laugh at hardships, and keep her temper

through everything, she's rare," he added, and shook his head.

"I think," said Becky, "that we women feel a secret exultant delight when all our regular habits are put out of gear, when we breakfast at lunch time, miss our dinner, and are hungry in the small hours, even in tragedy rejoice in the upheaval of all things, and are primitive once more, not the victims of false habits.

"Did you ever read 'A Man and a Woman'?" she went on dreamily; "the love between that man and that woman, and the life they lived, is the most beautiful thing I ever heard or read about; . . . they had much trouble before they became man and wife, and he took her away into the very depths of a forest, and erected a tent for her, and piled it with sweet-smelling grasses, and there they dwelt with the clean forest scents and sounds around them, and they went out together, and shot together, and she saved his life; . . . and I don't think Adam and Eve ever so thoroughly learned what real happiness was, as they did.

"As the book says:

"All alone save for her in the forest, miles away from any other human being! He had wholly loved but two things all his life, and the three of them, she, Nature and he, were here together! It was wonderful!

> "'Let come what will, there is one thing worth,
> To have held fair love in the life upon earth,
> To have held love safe till the day grew night
> While skies had colour, and lips were red.'

"And in the end, before their love was half burnt out,

he died, and God was good to them, and let her die too. I try to think that Walter and Tolly's life is like that, but I can't, quite."

"No," he said slowly, "but those were very exceptional people. How wonderful to love like that," he spake as a man does of what he cannot understand, and sat looking into the fire for a while in a brown study; and it was significant of the swiftly-grown friendship that often they sat silent thus. Then Becky said—

"If we take a moment for ourselves, if we dare to *be* ourselves, the world calls us mad, though perhaps it is the one moment of our lives in which we are most true to ourselves. But it would be a grand thing to know, in dying, that we have not walked between Society's policemen all our lives, that in spite of walking alone, we have done the right thing, the beautiful thing, and like those two people been *happy*. . . ."

She pulled up abruptly, this was drifting into sentiment with a vengeance, and she changed the subject on the spot.

"When are we going to fight again?" she said briskly. "Jane Pomeroy says the empire is rotting internally, and that a great war, anything that makes men *act*, has an immediate result in virility of art, letters, everything, that when swept to primitive emotions we cease to quarrel over shades of opinions, and degrees of luxury and vice. She makes insulting comparisons between the Elizabethan age and ours, and says we shall go unrepresented by a single great name through the ages. Perhaps anything is good that empties our rag-bags of minds, any earth-

quake in which we throw away all our useless impedimenta, escaping with the bare essentials of life, just in our own skins as it were, and begin it all again, *ourselves*, not the mouthpieces of other people."

David smiled, as he often did when she talked over his head.

"Do you talk to Billy like this?" he said. "He's an awfully clever chap, you see, and I'm not. And now he's away, you've got his letters, you know, when you want to be intellectual."

Becky blushed and frowned, and in a momentary recoil from the brutality of sport, accused him of being "limited" and not a little selfish. And indeed many a woman whose jealous fears have roved hither and thither, only to stand affrighted before the real bogie at last, the bogie that she can never oust, for it is his life, his soul, his *alter ego*, has laid down her arms and fought no more, silently letting the strong predilection suck the man dry, while the living heart beside him slowly starves for love.

Presently Becky smoothed out her ruffled plumes, and while she worked at a slipper that had been in hand five years, inquired what the term "big game" in Africa covered.

"Well, we have a feast of big game set out before the hunter in the elephant, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, buffalo, giraffe, Cape leopard, hyena, jackal, quagga, zebra, and others. I've been fairly lucky, and brought back with me at different times samples of all these beasts, but I'm awfully cocky over a sable antelope, one

of the greatest prizes a sportsman can secure even in that region so prolific of game.

"The hyenas are horrid brutes," he went on. "If a comrade is shot at night his companions have devoured him before morning, and round our camp fire we could hear them holding high carnival over the body, laughing their hideous laugh with fiendish glee. At night they quietly walk behind men on horseback, or in bullock-waggons, ready to avail themselves of any accident for a meal."

Becky expressed herself disappointed. She loved all animals, but for the fiercer wild beasts had an even stronger fellow feeling. She loved to think of them with their soundless step roaming over the boundless plains, the trackless forests, and feeling their vastness all too circumscribed for their untameable spirits.

"The leopards are the worst to tackle," he said. "Their ferocity beats every other animal's hollow, and to see them climb trees is a treat. Their favourite dish is young baboons. A striking corroboration of the affinity of the dog-wolf to wolves, is given in the fact that when the former (who accompany the waggons of hunting parties for running down or bringing to bay wounded game) are hounded on to chase the 'Wilde Hond,' or wolf, the encounter always ends in a friendly reconnaissance, and they separate with a lofty air of its being quite a mistake, though the same dogs would tear in pieces the common hyena."

Becky looked sharply at him. She often suspected him of poking fun at her, as, though he gave her a great

deal of information, he never mentioned the fierce peril, the ardour and courage of the true hunter that she knew him to be. However, she had asked for game, and she should have it.

"In Damaraland, where Walter has found the treasure," said David, "they are very poorly off for game. They have only the gemsbok—supposed to be the real exponent of the fabulous unicorn—and the springbok, who has a knack of arching his body and jumping with all four feet off the ground at once. He has horns like a Jew's harp. And by-the-bye, the lion roars no more—at least when guns are plenty and traders' waggons about. He has actually laid to heart the fact that safety lies only in absolute silence."

"There goes another illusion," said Becky. "I always thought more of the roar than the lion, didn't you? But women will never make good hunters," and she shook her head; "they haven't enough patience. Perhaps a great part of a man's passion for sport is, that he loves the pauses, the sweet smells and sounds that come to him in pursuit of it."

David nodded. He was very keen on those gleams of beauty and colour with which Nature condescends to solace the endless waiting hours, the tireless patience of the hunter, and which she has not wholly withheld from the unromantic pioneer when he took those little walks abroad that sometimes seized his fancy.

"It is the rain that is Africa's magician, and the flowers are her children," he said; "only their lives are as brief as those of most beautiful things are. In

Namaqualand I have seen within a week after rain, hundreds of acres covered with sheets of living fire, or glowing purple flowers visible from several miles distance; and in botany, as in most other things, Africa comes out at the top of the class, for no single country in the world has contributed so largely to European conservatories and gardens as the Cape of Good Hope. We have sent you pelargoniums, heaths, orchids—and some of the orchids are clippers. I think the blue ones take the cake—the colour of your eyes exactly," with a fleeting glance at Becky, for he hated compliments himself and supposed that others did the same.

"You are a very surprising person," she said; "who would have supposed you to be an accomplished botanist?"

"And what they call the Arum," he continued inexorably, "with its pure white spathe, is as common an ornament of all moist, low-lying ground as the English dock is in ditches; as to the heaths, there are three hundred and fifty species in Table Mountain region alone. You'll see a whole mountain side glow a warm pink with one of them; but all the flowers are not beautiful," he added, making a face. "There's the carrion flower, a sort of cactus with a star-shaped, lurid-coloured, and offensively-scented flower, though that's nothing to the Jackal's Kost. It is from four to six inches long, outwardly of a dull brown, internally of a fine rose red, which fades first to a deep blood colour, and finally to a reddish brown. But the odd thing is that it smells like roast beef that is 'off.' Then there is another that bleeds, and smells strongly of fish; there

is the Elephant's Trunk and the Elephant's Foot, and perhaps the most comical of the lot is the Tumboa, which Walter has seen often enough near Walfisch Bay, which looks like two fat hams placed side by side, a long green streamer stuck into each, and a bunch of red-coloured small pine cones between them, a pure bit of bounce on Nature's part, who arbitrarily chose to combine the peculiar characteristics of several plants which are widely separated in scientific classifications."

"And the grasses," cried Becky, perceiving that he meant to pay her out and half-kill her with information.

"Oh! absolutely worthless as pasture — the Sour Copper-Wire Grass (there's a label for you!), the Stink Grass, the Trunk, and the Berg—no one has a good word to say for them; but the Breede blaauw grass (sounds like Scotch swearing), the silvery hair grass, and the Akervaine, whose roots have a peculiar fragrance, and are used by colonists against moths and insects, are treated with more respect. Then there is a plant that is poisonous only when its seed-pods are on it, and the goats and kids that eat of it die. And the Magow is more deadly still, the terror of traders in those parts in spring."

"I wonder you don't write a book," said Becky, "with a dictionary, of course."

"So it's not all beer and skittles," said David, ignoring the sarcasm; "even the plants are rum devils; they want to be alive and grab at you, and there's one—calls himself a fruit, he does—named the grapple plant. The capsular fruit is like two crabs joined back to back, with hooked claws projecting from the lower surface of each,

ready to catch hold of whatever may turn up. They are hard and dry, measuring two inches across, and the ox whose lips or tongue gets caught in one of those hooks doesn't get the best of it, and when a man gets caught in the prickles of the asparagus plant, called over there 'Wait-a-wee,' he quickly finds out its meaning, for as fast as he disentangles himself from one lot he is caught by another, and he will have ample time to 'do a swear' before he gets away.

"There are thickets through which even horses cannot pass; there is the dornboom, the haaken doorn, the haaken steek doorn, having both hooked and straight thorns, and Dr. Kirk is said to have playfully classified the thorns seen by him as those which scratch the skin, those that tear the flesh, those which tear the clothes, and those which tear the clothes *and* flesh."

"And you want," said Becky, feeling a little "off" Africa, "to go back to them?"

"Indeed I do," he said, springing up and pacing the room, as if it were the veldt, "I want to see my old friend the sickle thorn again, that has a leaf like that of the acacia, but grows like a briar, sending out from its roots long runners or shoots to the height of two feet, armed with enormous thorns, which, wherever they catch, cut so fearfully that neither lash nor shout will induce horses to face it. Often it will bring up dead short a horse engaged in the elephant hunt, shooting the rider—your humble servant among others—over its head, but it all comes in the day's work."

He was looking straight before him, his grey eyes

alight, looking as a man may at the unseized mistress who draws, subjugates, beckons him, beckons him to a kingdom of which the presiding spirit is beautiful indeed, but cruel, freakish, and terrible, where even the little black children will be seen mimicking the ghastly twitchings of poor victims' features after their heads have been cut off.

And Becky, whom overmuch love had spoiled, so that she thought all love was hers to take, dreamed a dream, her eyes shone, and joy triumphant sang in her heart; she saw the four walls of her straitened life fall away, felt herself step out with a glorious freedom into the open air, with the sweet breast of mother-earth open to receive her, the boundless horizon beyond, the man she loved beside her, and all the pettiness, the nullity of the artificial life behind her, shrivelling up as a scroll. She felt leaping in her the capacity to be something better, nobler, with a truer notion of God's meaning of woman's destiny, than she had ever seen and known before, and all her clean, healthy, out-door instincts drew her powerfully to the life of travel, of adventure—ay, and of hardship, for has not Nature her hard, cold hours, as her happy, blossoming ones?

Suddenly he came back to her.

"If you were a man, and once went there, Africa would woo you, and you would never come back," he said, "to stay.

> "'Do you 'ear the bells a-calling,
> The tinkling bells of Mandalay?'

"Well, what Mandalay is to my old friend Tommy Atkins, Africa is to Walter and me. But you must *see*

it, no words could do justice to those rich and marvellous colour effects, only possible in that dry air, and varying so much that where at noonday there will be only grey naked rock, at sunrise it will be purple with the light of dawn, giving place to glorious flushes of crimson and gold; or just before sunset, when a thousand changing tints will smite those walls of rock with living flames of royal crimson and vivid bronze, that intensify the dark, steel-blue shades cast by sharp projections on their furrowed sides. The Karoo plateau has a great attraction for me—its translucent sky, its buoyant air, 'exhilarating as wine to the senses,' its starry, balmy, and dewless nights, its measureless expanse, and vast, untrodden solitude, even its weird desolateness, its silence and solemnity, appeal to me in some way that other parts of South Africa do not."

He burst out laughing, for he had allowed himself to be carried away.

"But the fact is, civilisation chokes, stifles, kills me," he said.

"As it does others," said Becky, putting up both hands to her throat, "as it does me. What is the longing for independence but the deeply-rooted instinct of 'going on one's own,' a survival of the time when man took what he wanted for food from the treasures of sea, and land, and sky, asking no one, depending on no one but himself and his own exertions? It may have been hard work, but he had the most glorious thing of all, utter independence of everything and everybody—just God in His sky, he on God's earth."

She got up, and fetched a book from a table near, and sought a page she had turned down. Somehow, only books of travel and adventure found a place near Becky in those days—she studied things, not people.

"Listen," she said, "to what Seton-Karr, the great hunter, says—

"'Life in the present day has been made by science and civilisation so easy that all *strenuousness* is departed from it, and we are in danger of losing that power of romance and imagination which in days of old fired the heart of the knight, stepping forward into the realms of the mystic and the unknown. . . .

"'To the scientist, the sportsman, and the explorer, the world lies broad and open, to the daring, all things are possible, and to the adventurous comes many a curious and undreamed-of experience . . .' He speaks then of the 'boredom of our civilisation — the giant of the commonplace—the daily pressing incubus of the hopelessly trivial. . . . Life is but of one flavour, while the variety of the world, earth's greatest charm, is unknown to them—apathy and insufferable sameness, dull for such weary ones the feast of existence.' . . . He calls us 'slaves of the hot-water can and evening paper,' and he might have added, of the morbid interest we take in ourselves. He goes on—

"'How to turn the weariness of existence into the joy of living. . . . I believe in the transmission through thousands of years from early man of instincts and tendencies which are now unsuitable to present day conditions. For instance, I believe that our modern civilisation, and the

trammels and restrictions which are imposed upon us by it, clash with instincts which we have within us, and which were suited to the wider and freer life of the more turbulent existence of prehistoric days. Now all instincts are divine, there is no one instinct that is less divine than another in its conception—that is to say, while it is purely instinct, and has not been changed, or contaminated by the brain. Such an instinct is the instinct of that restlessness which to-day is the faint reverberation through the ages of the wars and wanderings of primeval man.' That is why, when there is war, men fall over each other in their haste to get to the front, they are sick of rusting, sick of peace, fighting is a stern necessity of their blood, and they joy in fulfilling it. Don't you think men were born to *do* things, not think them?"

"Some men don't want to," he said, "Carrington, for instance. I could almost suspect him of playing Bezique, and I should say he would never run any personal risks." Quite unconsciously his hand touched something he carried, and he relapsed into thought.

Becky looked up suddenly, her heart beat, and she turned a little pale, but she had for weeks been longing to say it—and now out it came.

"Are you hiding anything?" she said, "I have often seen your hand steal up to your breast-pocket—and there's a bump there—how a smart man like you can spoil the set of your waistcoat like that, I can't imagine—and Walter told me, told me——"

"What did he tell you?" said David quickly, though in the moment his face had changed, and there had

sprung into it lines, as on Walter's, that had been permanently carved there by moments of tense expectancy, when life is risked at long odds. Looking at him then, Becky for the first time realised that in the depths of this mere boy's heart were such strength and purpose as might in peril rise even to the genius of command, sweeping to victory those who followed him, as men will follow the man who absolutely does not know what fear is.

"He would not tell me all," said Becky, "but I gathered that you had done something—something that might bring down a fate on you like Walter Ingram's—I fancied you might have——"

"Brought a mummy home in my breast-pocket," said David, laughing. "No. And I have had no accidents—as yet."

"Walter's message to you was—'Drop it,'" said Becky eagerly, "just those two words, 'drop it.' Why don't you?"

But David shook his head, with a very devil of obstinacy in his eyes.

"I never turn back," he said. "I'm like Walter; and *he's* like a herd of buffaloes that marches straight on—over a precipice if one comes in the way—but turn back they never do. I think they must come of British stock," he added, laughing.

But Becky was not heeding him, she was looking at the drawn rose-coloured satin curtain that hung between the two drawing-rooms, and that now wavered, flickered, as in a draught—and there was no draught anywhere, it was bitterly cold, and all the windows were shut.

She walked sharply up to the curtain, and pulled it aside, but the room beyond was silent and empty, yet she had a vivid sense that something had been there, almost under her hands, that had moved away at her approach with the undulance of flowing water.

She ran through the room, and on to the landing, but found nothing, her imagination had played her a trick, why should any one hide there and listen? Yet what did David mean when he spoke of "accidents"?

She came slowly back to where he sat, thinking deeply, and presently he looked up.

"I should like to tell you all about it," he said after a minute or two, "but it might frighten you—the thing, I mean, not the curse that hangs over it. I think I can promise you that murder shall not be done here. It's not my idea of sport to let go; besides, there's a promise connected with it, and I never break a promise. My dear little girl, don't," he added suddenly, as tears welled suddenly over her eyes, for she had been badly frightened, and rolled down her cheeks, and like a good comrade, he took out his handkerchief, and gently wiped them away.

To Quekett they had always appeared as two happy, irresponsible children, setting out arm in arm to make mud pies, and otherwise tomfool round together, with a lofty contempt for those pastors and masters to whom they had given the slip, but now that danger threatened one of them, the other was pierced to the heart, and the bond revealed between them in all its strength. And love, or friendship, which you will, likes quick bargains and congenial company, and sometimes he draws

together two people as perfect comrades, then through these qualities welds them at last into a perfect example of love that for ever defies time and change; but oftener he sets their faces different ways, and they go mourning all their days for the happiness that might have been theirs, but was not.

If Becky and David had each gone through life asking a question, the one often and consciously, the other only at odd moments, the answer to which was at that very moment close at hand, they did not know it as they stood there, two chums united in a peril that one of them well knew to be deadly, that the other only feared to be so.

Jane Pomeroy, walking in at the moment, a somewhat irritable convalescent, remarked to herself grimly that it was a good job Billy was coming home in a few days, and yet when they flew to welcome her, and fenced her round with cushions, and footstool, and devoted attention, she could but smile, and think that, after all, casual youth is a very delightful and beautiful thing.

But presently she sighed, perhaps reading Becky's heart by the light of her own youth, for she had lived it all, seen it all; yet if she had her life over again, with all her experience and young blood, would commit every one of her mistakes over again, for though in middle age we may master nature, in youth nature masters us.

"If youth knew—if old age could;" but that brilliant epitome of all the wisdom and wit of the world is logically false, because youth could never know, and will not be taught, and old age could never feel vividly, or wish to, unless abnormal, and therefore mad.

CHAPTER IX

"Lo, the disregarded Darnel
With itself adorns the wheat-field,
And for all the vernal season
Satisfies the farmer's eye!
But the hour of harvest coming,
And the thrasher by-and-by!
Then a barren ear shall answer,
'Darnel, and no Wheat, am I.'"

"Féo is back," exclaimed Jane Pomeroy, in some excitement at breakfast one morning early in December; "and what do you think, he—she always calls him *he*—is back from Africa."

"I know I shall hate him. The very worst use to which a man can put himself is to marry for money," said Becky. "Now if this one *loved* Féo——"

"He would be a brute if he didn't," said Jane Pomeroy indignantly, "considering her tried devotion to him."

"But don't you know," cried Becky, "that while a woman feels that her greatest claim on a man is, that she loved him first, *he* always feels that the woman he loved last has the strongest claim on him? A man is always true to what he wants, and though different in their ways of wooing, once married, men seem to be identical."

"Really," said Jane, "the interest you take in that young man is quite extraordinary. Um—um" (going on

with her letter), "mostly excuses for not having written —but as I haven't either, that doesn't matter. I must ask them to dinner—if I haven't forgotten how to order one. We have lived like dormice for the last month."

"Thoreau says, 'One may be drunk with love, without being any nearer to finding his mate,'" went on Becky, who seemed to take a keener interest in Féo's affairs than her breakfast; "on the other hand, love is an impish rascal who, seeing the board rightly spread, the fire burning, and all things made ready for him to walk in, and take his fill of pleasure, often runs straight home with every arrow safe in his quiver, as fast as his legs can carry him."

"Give me some of those devilled kidneys before they are cold," interrupted Jane Pomeroy, "and help me to make out a list of invitations after breakfast. A fortnight's invitation will be long enough. Billy will be back by then and able to come, I hope, or he can throw some one over—these young men seem to dine out every night in the week; but what can you expect, with five women to every man in Great Britain? And we'll ask Mary Chiltern, and Féo's ridiculous mother must come, of course—so we want three decent old men."

"No—two, and David," said Becky. "He and Féo's beloved can talk big game; Billy will do for *you*," she added, "you know you hate old men—and with Bibbetty-Bob for Mary Chiltern, and Colonel Hurran for Cleopatterer, we shall be a jolly little party. Come and write the cards"—and she dragged Jane off to her boudoir.

But at the third card, Jane's pen remained suspended in the air.

"I positively don't know the Christian name of Féo's *fiancé*, and I ought to, if he is to be my nephew by marriage," she said; "even his mother used always to speak of him as her boy—sometimes as her straight boy; but all these people call each other by nicknames —Ducky or Dolly, or something equally absurd—*she* calls him Goliath; but you might look him up in Debrett's."

Becky fetched the big book, and sat down with it on her knee; when she looked up she was a little pale.

"His name is David," she said, frowning, "David Bourke. What a coincidence!"

"That's why she calls him Goliath, I suppose," said Jane, filling in a blank space rapidly. "I do hope Quekett will be in a good temper, and Mrs. Quekett up to her usual mark. She looks ill—she has altered lately in some indefinite way——"

Becky nodded.

"There's a grim look soldered down on her face, as if she feared something would escape she didn't want to," she said. "Auntie," she added, under her breath, "have you ever caught Quekett listening at doors? or does he keep a boa-constrictor down in the cellars that sometimes finds its way upstairs?" And she shivered, for snakes were the one thing that she shuddered at.

Jane Pomeroy's eyes dilated, clearly Becky was very mad indeed, and she tapped her own forehead significantly.

"But I tell you," cried Becky, "the curtain over there

moved the other day, and when I drew it aside, there was nothing, only something seemed to slither noiselessly through my fingers—it was like a nightmare in which you *feel* something horrible near you, but you can't see it."

"Thank God I haven't your imagination," said Jane piously. "And now, will you ring the bell, my dear, for these letters to be posted."

But Quekett, when he came, and was told the date of the little dinner, put a new face on affairs, and in his very best manner announced that Mrs. Quekett was ill, and quite unfit to do justice to her mistress's character as a dinner-giver at present. He would suggest interviewing Joseph at the Savoy, and persuading that great personage to think out something worthy of his name.

Now Jane hated the Savoy. She was wont to say that the place was not vulgar in itself, but vulgar in the sense that you went there, not to talk to your own guests, but to stare at, and listen to what people were saying and doing at the other tables, or to put it in another way, you went there to advertise yourself, not to enjoy your dinner.

Nevertheless, she meekly took back the addressed envelopes, and sat down to write out fresh cards, but Becky, watching the man as intently as *he* usually watched David, saw that there was a grey look about his mouth, and a queer expression in his eyes, not due to drink, that indicated intense excitement kept down by an iron hand. And the man was a born Sultan, he reigned as master in that houseful of women, and would suffer no other man below stairs; Jane Pomeroy had pleaded vainly for

a footman to go out with the carriage, but was only allowed a groom in livery from the stables.

He put a veto on Jane's going down to see his wife, the stone passages were cold and draughty, and she would take cold. Mrs. Quekett hoped to be well enough to come up for orders next morning as usual, meanwhile the kitchen-maid, trained by herself, was an accomplished cook, if not quite good enough for a dinner-party.

Becky silently resolved to go downstairs at an hour when he would be overlooking the woman who spent her whole time in cleaning silver. But as it happened, that was a day of developments, for Jane had hardly despatched the fresh cards, when Féo came flying into the room, a vision of gossamer loveliness and exquisite instability, that yet was very human, as within it beat just then a joyous heart.

"Becky! Aunt Jane!" she cried, and in turn each was enveloped in a faint perfume of violet, and received an unsubstantial kiss; but she was a treat to behold, all the same, as she sank into David's favourite chair, and radiantly ejaculated—

"He's come back, he's come back!"

"You mean Goliath?" said Becky, sitting down opposite her—a striking contrast in a plain white serge gown that would have been the ruin of any lines less perfect than hers, but though there might be two opinions about her beauty, there never was but one about her shape. "When did he arrive?"

"I don't know, but he wrote to me from the Carlton, saying that if I were not coming back he would come out

to me at St. Moritz, so of course mother and I *flew* home, and he is nicer than ever, and I'm the happiest girl alive."

For she knew only too well how many proud young fellows, stricken down by deadly fever among the dusky savages, never come back, but take their rest beneath a little heap of stones hidden away in high grass, and brambles, with the cry of passing bird, or croaking frog in the swamps hard by, for lullaby. And for those at home one day there is a large blue envelope, containing a packet of letters, mostly addressed, not sent. Stamps are often not procurable, and they are written on different-sized sheets of paper, full of unpronounceable native names of places, and relating to unknown persons and events. Whole pages full of hopes of coming home, and inquiries about family and friends—for ever unanswered—they come into the trembling hands of those to whom they were written. Sometimes there is a shaky postscript containing a few feverish, broken words of farewell.

"We had just written to ask you both to dinner," said Jane, "I've never met him, you know—he has always been away."

For a moment the lovely human butterfly looked downcast, then she said eagerly—

"But he is going to take me with him when he goes back. Cissy Soltamore and lots of our women, now they find they can't keep their men from Africa, have decided to go with them," and Becky, looking at the richness of Féo's dress, at the embroidery lavished on embroidery, the costliness heaped on costliness, the very wantonness of wealth bent to subdued effects, inly wondered with how

few trunks Féo might consider it possible to stalk big game.

"You are all Africa-mad," cried Jane Pomeroy, "even Mary Chiltern believes South Africa to be built solely of diamonds, rubies, and gold. She longs to put her hand into that lucky-bag out of which so many women of her set have fished Russian sables, stocks, and shares, opera-boxes, and all manner of luxuries; it will end in our all having to go over to get away from the subject, but pretty fools you'd all look in the desert—a hundred miles from a tea-cake."

"And yet," said Becky slowly, "a primitive life, with one man—to be all things to him, he to her—mutually dependent on each other, and no other woman to cut in (that bond of interdependence is done away with by servants and civilisation), it must be very sweet."

"Yes," cried Féo eagerly, "and if one takes cooking lessons, and gets one's tailor to build one proper clothes—short, you know; and dark green faced up with leather is awfully smart."

Jane Pomeroy gave something not unlike a snort, and walked out of the room, for two African lunatics were rather more than she could stand.

"But you're so frail, Féo," said Becky, looking a little sadly at the girl, but appreciating that subtle air of *nous autres* that she knew so well, and did not laugh at, for it meant so much. It meant that the best of everything—the best men, the best places in the world, the best fun, the best of the very best that was going on in the world, from birth to bridal, from bridal to grave—was theirs!

"Men hate women who are ill—and there are no coiffeurs in the desert, you know."

"No, but men don't notice your looks when they're intent on hunting," said Féo shrewdly. "My cousin, who has been everywhere with her husband, once told me that. Women whom men make real comrades of seldom bother to put on powder and patches for them, and it saves so much trouble. They stand shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye, and the women often look ugly and worn; but the comradeship is the main thing, and they have it. Besides, what can you do if the man you love *won't* stay at home? Why, go with him, and make your home where he is."

"But I thought you were so fond of society," said Becky, much astonished at this peep into Féo's heart, that, like the rest of the world, she had supposed to be as elusive as her frocks.

"Yes, but I love him so," cried Féo. And she sprang up, and throwing out her arms, cried, "David is my *dar*-ling, my darling, my darling!" and at that moment the door opened, and Becky's David walked into the room.

Féo turned swiftly, saw him, and flew to his side, nay, to his breast, where she nestled down with a grace so exquisite, so instinct with the happiness of a homing bird, that the beauty of the whole thing struck first on Becky's senses; then, as David looked at her grimly, with tense jaw and muscles, over Féo's head, like a thunder-clap came to her the truth—it had been at the back of her head ever since her incursion into Debrett—and "*Oh! you moral coward!*" shouted her eyes, as they

measured with scorn his great height and strength, and fell on the arms that, with no grasp of steel in them such as his muscles promised, closed woodenly round the girl on his breast.

Féo lifted the aigrette that was tickling David's chin, and blushing very charmingly, led him up to Becky, who stood with her hand on the back of the courting-couch, still as a statue.

"I'm quite ashamed," she said, "but I haven't seen him for so long .... This is my Goliath. And who told you I was here?" she added, looking up at him with worshipping love in her brown eyes. "I didn't even tell mother I was coming."

"I came to see Miss Bethune," said David, and his voice was harsh. "Her brother saved my life in West Africa—I thought I told you about it—and she has been awfully kind to me too."

Féo glanced from one to the other, puzzled. There was nothing friendly in the looks of either towards each other, and she knew something of Becky's tender mercies towards men she did not happen to like.

"You might have told me," she said reproachfully to Becky; "but I forgot, you hadn't time, as mother and I came back directly we knew he had arrived."

Becky made no reply. She had taken up her fossil slipper, and was intent upon it. It struck Féo at once what a splendid gooseberry she made ... and this would be a lovely place to bring David to, and enjoy his company to her heart's content. At home there was always a crowd, and Cleopatterer, whom David loathed.

David sat fuming as Féo prattled on. By what cursed ill-luck had it happened that these two girls were friends, and yet neither had ever mentioned to him the other's name? Perhaps because Becky and he talked always of things, not people, and Féo wrote only of her love for him . . . and now he was too late to make that explanation he had come to make to Becky to-day, and she would think him a sweep to the end of her days.

He looked at his watch, and asked Féo if she would excuse him then, as a man was waiting for him at his club; but Féo proposed to share his hansom to her house in Piccadilly, which was almost next door, and as she turned to Becky she asked eagerly, "Might she come again soon, and bring Goliath?"

Behind her back, David's jaws worked noiselessly. So may you see outraged and well-bred coachmen relieving their surcharged feelings when unjustly involved in street difficulties, and Becky laughed out suddenly as the comedy of the whole thing struck her.

"Come as often as you like," she said. "I'll make it my business that no one disturbs you," and David thanked her with a look that was positively murderous, and was just departing, when Quekett appeared, and would Miss Surrenden kindly go upstairs for a moment to Mrs. Pomeroy?

Féo ran away, and as the door closed behind her, David drew a deep breath, and stepped up to where Becky sat working, and as he came near, she lifted her head, and their eyes met, and clashed like opposing forces; both their faces were white, and both very stern.

"Well?" she said.

He looked away from her, it was as if she were saying aloud that the hunters of big game, and the physically fearless, were worse than cowards when it came to a question of moral courage.

"We were such awfully good pals," he said, "and now you will never believe in me again."

"Didn't you think we were good enough to know a man with a courtesy title?" she said with scorn in her eyes, "it holds about as much value to me as it would to Walter. Jane Pomeroy noticed that you never spoke of your people, but it did not trouble me, you were unconventional like Walter, and so was I," she added, with a touch of self-contempt that cut him to the quick. If she had been like other modern maidens, how could he have had that good time here that he had snatched before going to perform a hateful duty?

"Becky!" he cried, "don't make it out worse than it really is. Walter knew me in Africa as plain David; I had myself announced by the name he knew me by, and I only meant to deliver his letter as I had promised, and never return. But I couldn't keep away, it was like the man who was dying, and who said, 'I feel like a man with a broken umbrella going out to face the storm,' and *my* umbrella was broken, and you made a warm nest for me before I faced *my* storm, and I stayed."

"Poor Féo," said Becky, looking straight before her, were men never to do anything to win her respect, only disillusion her? And David was no better than the rest.

Becky could not have told how, but instantly she had

ranged herself on Féo's side against David. The intense loyalty of her nature settled the question without even consulting her mind, such love and trust as Féo's were beautiful and *right*. Like good soldiers her sympathies fell into step with the only honourable, the inevitable thing to do, for she had the same bias towards truth as some natures have towards the crooked and the evil.

"Why did you not go to St. Moritz?" she said abruptly.

"I came first to you, then went home, and I told my father straight I couldn't marry Féo. But the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge," he added bitterly, "and he reminded me of my promise to my mother, and I have got to go through with it. Luckily it had not got into the papers that I was back, so after a time I wrote to St. Moritz and Féo returned at once. I was just going to tell you about it when she came in."

"Jane Pomeroy will be furious," said Becky, taking thought for David's comfort, as women always do for a man in the wrong. "Everything has been in a conspiracy to hide your identity, her illness and no visitors to enlighten her, Féo's absence abroad," she pressed her hand to her forehead—"but she is fond of you, and perhaps it will all come right. We will try and have a good time here—we three," but the brave voice broke a little, and she got up, and went to the window, staring out.

He looked with eager grudging eyes round the familiar room where they had spent so many happy hours, then

he went over to her, and gripped her arm, and she looked up at him with a thrill almost of fear, he was as strong as two ordinary men, and could have broken her into pieces where she stood.

"Look here," he said, "Féo or no Féo, you and I are going to be good pals just the same, do you hear? And if you lock the front door against me, I'll get in by way of the area."

"Poor boy!" she said, for the reckless lines in his haggard young face made her heart ache, "but it's so much worse for Féo than you, because she loves you."

"How could a bit of gossamer like that *love?*" burst out David with all a man's genuine contempt for a commodity he does not happen to want. "It's the excitement, the silly halo of romance that hangs round the men who *do* things instead of sitting in easy-chairs, that attracts her, one month of the life I live would kill the poor child outright."

"It's *love*, just sheer *love*," said Becky stoutly, "and I honestly don't believe you're worth it. No man is."

At that moment Féo and Jane Pomeroy came in together, and Becky flew at Féo, and begged her to fetch from the study a new photograph of herself upon which she wanted her opinion. The moment the door had closed on Féo, who was rather bewildered at being thus ordered about, Becky went up to Jane Pomeroy, and put an arm round the somewhat ruffled figure.

"Auntie," she said, "David has been doing something very stupid, and I want you to forgive him."

"You have fallen in love with each other?" she said,

and smiled; "well, my dear, I always told you that warm friendship between young men and young women was a total impossibility, and Quekett has been most indiscreet, and taken advantage of my being laid up."

"You are quite wrong," cried Becky, with scarlet cheeks. "David is going to marry Féo—he is *Goliath*, you know, whom we had so often heard of, but never seen."

"The shears of Fate have cut the tent-ropes of his life,
And the broker of Hope has sold them for nothing,"

murmured Omar in Jane Pomeroy's voice, then her face grew at once cold and very indignant.

"Where was the secret?" she said proudly. "Why did not you come here in your own name? I always felt that something was wrong. Poor Féo," she added aloud, but in her heart she was angry on account of a totally different person.

"He has done no harm," cried Becky, standing dauntless in the forefront of battle, but still keeping an eye on the door. "Walter knew him as plain David, and it was quite natural he should give the same name here. If you had not been upstairs ill, it would have come out long ago, and he and Féo are coming here often, to get away from Cleopatterer, you know, and you'll be a sweet old darling, and make things pleasant all round," she added, kissing the top of Jane Pomeroy's smooth head, just as Quekett announced—

"Mr. Carrington."

Billy came in eagerly, and if his brightness dimmed at sight of David, who stood defiant on the hearthrug,

he yet brought his usual air of comedy to lighten the surcharged atmosphere, and it was a little shock to him when Becky, with a cool wave of her hand, said—

"Let me introduce Mr. David properly—Lord Moray —who is going to be married to Féo Surrenden, whom you know."

Billy's eyeglass dropped, and the two men's eyes met in a long, close *reconnaissance*, then they touched hands, and David with a gesture of farewell that included the whole party, left.

"I'll pick up Féo downstairs," he said, thus releasing the poor girl from searching for a photograph that was not in existence.

"Billy," cried Becky, who was quite white, but had never looked prettier, "sit down and tell me all you have been doing, there's just time before luncheon. We are as dull as ditchwater—and Auntie hasn't got over the 'flu' yet—but now you've come back we mean to enjoy ourselves."

There were tears in the girl's brave voice, but only Jane Pomeroy knew it, for Billy was groping in his mind for something, and at last found it.

"No wonder his face seemed familiar to me," he said, "for Lord Moray is not only one of the finest and coolest hunters of big game alive, but half-a-dozen years ago he was one of the smartest men about town. Miss Féo is lucky," he added with a sudden rise of spirits, and then they went down to luncheon, and in the warm red room, its walls rich with those pictures that come nearest in our surroundings to the beauty of nature,

the three ate their cheery meal, and Jane Pomeroy silently admired the splendid courage with which Becky met the situation.

For Becky had fashioned unto herself, and by her imagination created, a man as she would have him to be, and lo! he was but of clay, and lay broken in the dust. But it was quite in keeping with Becky's character, that when Billy was gone, she should go up to Jane and say—

"You always gave me *carte blanche* about new frocks and hats, dear, didn't you? And up to this, I've never taken it, but now I *will*."

And Jane Pomeroy, knowing that many an aching heart is eased by the perfect cut of the clothes above it, replied heartily, "*Do*."

CHAPTER X

"Were my Palace," she replied,
"Wider than Horizon-wide,
It were narrower than an Ant's eye
Were my Treasure not inside;
And an Ant's eye, if but there
My Lover, heaven's Horizon were."

Becky being promoted to the post of gooseberry, and David showing himself positively dangerous near Cleopatterer, Féo made no ceremony of using the house in Hill Street as her own, and even annexed the services of Jane Pomeroy when a chaperone was required for those little dinners, and plays, and suppers, into which they straightway plunged with true out-of-season zest.

Féo would not stir anywhere without Becky, for somehow, though the two had seemed to dislike each other at first, David was much nicer when Becky was there than when she wasn't, and the latter had never seen life from so altogether desirable a standpoint, or had a chance of enjoying it more keenly, than during the fortnight after Féo's morning visit, and the revelation of David's identity.

To go about everywhere, and do everything worth doing, under the auspices of one of the smartest and most experienced men about town, taken care of, and looked after, as such men do take care of their women, should have been heaven to Becky—and with some wonderful

new frocks and hats, acquired as if by magic, thrown in, what more should a poor girl want to make her happy?

Féo loved fussy things round her neck, and David loathed them. There is nothing more absolutely maddening to the mere male mind (unacclimatised) than the feather boa, for instance; it whirls, it obscures, it shades a woman's face till a man loses his bearings, and for the life of him can't tell if it be a beautiful one or not. Now Becky was always taut, and of the two girls he took everywhere, if Féo were smart, the ultra-smartness of Becky created a sensation. Men crowded about him, pretending to talk big game, but really trying to get in a word edgeways with this new girl whom nobody knew, and who was dressed with such daring simplicity, while her face was a small lamp of vivacity and delicate colour, beside which Féo's beauty showed as a mere lifeless silhouette. These were handled by Becky with a masterly ease and dexterity, for what the Bethunes did not know about flirtation was not worth thinking about, and among other disagreeable impressions David was just then forming of her, stood out the central one, that she was a witch well skilled in the arts that please men.

For men love fire and *esprit* in a woman—even if they don't want it by their own hearths, they like to warm themselves at it occasionally, and go on their way feeling brighter, and more highly vitalised for having been drawn into that orbit of tremendous *joie de vivre*.

Becky naturally attracted to herself her opposites, and notably one Kelmersdale, a dark, weary man, who followed her like her shadow. Many were the marches he stole on

David to get for even a moment that little face, with the blue eyes of an angel, and the mischief of old Nick in it, turned towards him, and to do Becky justice, she was never backward in obliging him and others, and secretly delighted in putting Master David in a boiling rage.

There were outsiders, who pretended to know her well, who used to say—

"Not know Becky Bethune? The smartest little girl in town for a few months of the year, and a Plymouth Brother, or something of that sort in the country, the rest of her time."

Jane Pomeroy made Kelmersdale welcome in Hill Street, for she admired his type, and greatly enjoyed his conversation, but never gave a thought to his suit to Becky, it was too absurd. And she was vexed with Billy, who had somehow missed his chance, and had not worked in with the recent pleasant little parties as he should have done. Then she thought of Lavenders, and groaned, for the girl would have enough time there in which to count up her wounds.

But every drop of fighting blood in Becky was up, and to hide the truth, she would act her most brilliant in defiance of fate, and if David had disappointed her, —well, she would disappoint him, and if she valued her vogue for just what it was worth, because she was seen always with David Moray, of whom every-one was talking, and who knew every man in town worth knowing, still she would enjoy it to the full, and then good-night! The texts and cold puddings of Lavenders would claim and engulf her, and she would be seen no more.

The smart women admitted her pre-eminence in clothes, and the way she put them on, but honestly believed virtue incapable with so much style—and men smiled, and said David Moray was in luck, and that he had a devil of a temper, and was determined to keep that little crib all to himself. Also, they said, it was rough on Féo, that this new girl with her extraordinary snap should so completely snuff out that wrought-lily of perfection. Of a morning in Bond Street (the most successful draw in December for your friends and enemies), there was a rush to get in a word with Becky Bethune, and to be sure she had some fairly tingling ones ready in reply.

Excellent company she undoubtedly was, but always unconventional, her carelessness of speech grew, even as every day she grew thinner, and the flame in her blue eyes brighter—and when David was by to see and hear, every little thing that she knew he most hated to see a woman say or do, she deliberately said or did. Recklessness is a fine enhancer of wit, and Becky's tongue was sharp, and at thrust and *riposte* she could give points to the most spiteful woman, or impertinent man alive; David's brow would darken, and Féo tremble for what she was going to say next, while Jane Pomeroy looked quietly on, the only one of them all who in the least understood the situation.

Secretly Jane took a fearful joy in seeing Becky do and say the things that fifty well-regulated years had not been able to stifle in her yet untamed breast, and that, after all, were not so much wickedness as mischief; for, however constantly Becky did the wrong thing, she just as often reverted to the right.

David did not know that she was skilfully etching in, stroke by stroke, the disagreeable impression she was resolute to produce on him; it was so subtly done, that he believed she was only revealing herself unconsciously; an altogether different Becky to the one of simple, sincere nature, with tastes like his own, with whom he had spent so many charmed hours in happy talk at Hill Street. She had been making game of him, of course, in pretending to prefer the perils of the desert to those joys of town in which she was so thoroughly at home, and that she adorned so signally. Often, he felt that he hated her for having gulled him so easily.

He took them one day to the shrouded house in Portman Square, full of faded splendours that Féo's money was to reburnish, and when his back was turned, Jane Pomeroy silently pointed out the portrait of his mother, a sweet-faced lady, who would have been handsome but for a slight obliquity of nose.

"He adored her," whispered Jane, "and *she* adored Shotterbourne, for he always studied women in little things, and rooked them in big. It has been the same with them all ever since. And Féo will never release David—and *he* is bound by that death-bed promise—so he has no chance."

"I don't wonder he prefers big game to this," said Becky, looking round, and then he showed them the many skins and trophies of his wanderings thrown to him, as it were, in reward of forfeiting his manhood's birthright. Becky went away, saying resolutely to herself, David must be placed honourably in pawn, and Féo

made happy. Poor Féo who could not keep out of her brown, dog's eyes the utter foolishness of love when David was present, though Becky upbraided her every day, and implored her to flirt, make David wretched, or *do* something—only cut deep into him, and let him know she was there.

"Men are beasts," she cried, stamping her foot, "and they ought to worship *us*"—but alas! the mixing that had been left out in her mother's brains was missing in Féo's also, and she was like a salad without a hint of garlic, or a boiled leg of mutton divorced from caper sauce.

And yet there were times when Féo's exquisite femininity and tenderness soothed David, and he told himself she was worth fifty of the other. But unfortunately the mood did not last, the spell of Becky was upon him, body and soul, and with every hour his temper grew worse.

In choosing their Christmas presents, he had bought for Becky a quaint, keen-edged dagger to use as paper-knife, and Féo had begged him not—"it cuts love, you know!" she said. But David had laughed, and said there was never any wasted between him and Becky, and she would not accept jewels of any kind, so what was there left to buy? And Féo had sighed, and gone back to those coloured stones that Nature hides deep in her entrails, and upon which she demands so heavy a toll of human life ere ever they are torn from her. Richer colours far hath she in her flowers and heavens, but it is the hidden that ever draws the curious heart of man.

It was at Prince's one night, when every one near was

looking at her, that David got his most vivid revelation of Becky's extraordinary *cachet* and distinction. She wore a black and silver gown, shaped in masterly fashion to a skin of alabaster, and her blue eyes were as a panorama, that told the story of what was passing around, flashing jewel-like through her own vivid mind.

"My God! she's lovely!" he said to himself under his breath, and yet if he had never admired her more, he had never liked her less than at that moment.

Kelmersdale had come over from an adjoining table, he was very keen in his pursuit of her, but he could seldom find her at home, or get more forward in their acquaintance, though the radius within which people meet who know each other is so small, that many meetings must occur in the course of a long night and short winter's day in town. He would not be frowned away by David, but sat by her, fascinated, watching her eyes.

And in truth Becky was beautiful that night, but not one of all the men who admired her knew why . . . it was only that a soul, a temperament, caught at its highest emotional point, flashed like an electric shock into their dull minds and hearts, and quickened them. Every highly vitalised woman has such moments once in her life, when her body is a mere envelope through which the spirit shines. If beauty of any kind be hers, and that beauty cunningly set off, then will the vibrating, illumined creature be as a sword of fire among men, and with one accord will they turn about to follow that dazzling light.

Becky knew that this night was the end, or almost the

end, of a wonderful fortnight into which had been crammed a life-time, and if the rings had slipped off her fingers with her gloves just now, what matter?

"Awful brute that Kelmersdale," David said as they drove from Prince's to Hill Street, "rotten in mind and body—a regular old woman—never takes exercise from one year's end to another. But he hates sport, so what can you expect?"

"He is very subtle, though," said Becky, luminous under the electric light, more a spirit than a girl, as David with a sudden thrill of apprehension thought,—indeed, of the two she looked more frail than Féo.

"My dear," said Jane Pomeroy, who made a fourth in the carriage, "the subtle man, the specialist in women's souls, who is able to diagnose their every symptom of disease, is neither happy himself, nor capable of making other people happy. If I were a girl I wouldn't look at his estates or rent-roll, but at the man himself. And Kelmersdale is charming—he is one of the last of the race of really fine gentlemen,—but as a husband I should much prefer Billy"—she paused—for with Becky, suggestion was as good as a feast.

They arrived at Hill Street at that moment, and from the door-step Becky looked back, as Féo and David rolled away in that cosy white interior, side by side, through the night.

"How lovely it would be," she said to herself as she went in, "if—if——"

CHAPTER XI

"There is no path but one
For noble natures."

DAVID detested scandal of any kind; like Walter, he was used to sharp effects, and had clear eyes, and whenever Becky could get his ear, she talked it, with Billy to aid and abet her, for Billy often dropped in at Hill Street, even if he were left out of their fun, and the game of waiting he had played all through, he was playing still.

They were all in the drawing-room one afternoon before the lamps were lit, waiting for tea, and Becky was sailing as near the wind as she dared in her conversation, and David was listening to her with strong disgust imprinted on his features. Presently, she and Billy fell to discussing an amazingly clever book by a notorious decadent that she had recently been reading.

"It is the morbidezza of genius," said Becky.

"Beastly, *I* call it," cut in David indignantly, "there isn't a clean line in it from cover to cover."

Becky looked across to where he was sunk in a deep chair, and that fleeting glance, so visibly setting him at the bottom of a school of dullards, irritated him keenly. Big game was not half so much trouble, and he heartily wished he had never set eyes on a woman in his life.

"If only a man—really in the know," she said, "would write a 'Tom Jones' up to date, what a book it would be! But the Tom Jones's are all *living* their lives, not writing them, you know, Billy, and if I were a man I'd do the same."

"And blessed be the Lord who hath made you a woman," said Billy piously.

David's angry eyes glanced over her head almost as if he expected to see it defaced by curling tongs; and, indeed, not having Madonna features, it was astonishing how she managed to be so smart, without being curled and frizzed like a poodle, and over and over again he said to himself that she was the most disappointing creature he had ever known.

But he had yet to know the Bethunes, how exceedingly good they could be, or exceedingly bad, or even both together, and David abhorred flippancy in women just as Walter did. If they did not go so far as to say, "Men shall be trained for war, and women for the recreation of warriors," they were genuine men, with all the strong faults and virtues of their race.

Of the sham delicacies and subtleties of sick masculine souls they knew nothing. They faced naked life and naked truth without surprise, and without concern; their courage was in their blood, not dependent on mood or will, and they had gambled and drank, and loved, and made brutes of themselves quite as often as other men; but they still had sentiment, and a great reverence for all things cleanly, fine, and of good repute. There were things she must not say, might not do, in David's estima-

tion; and when Becky talked as he was used to hearing the smart members of his set talk, he vowed to himself that he would come thither to be disillusioned no more. But the frost held; he loathed Cleopatterer and all her ways, and Féo would not stir a yard from Becky, though he thanked Heaven she was careful not to repeat that exhibition of fondness into which she had been hurried on unexpectedly meeting him in Hill Street the first time.

And she, and Becky, and Billy would sit and talk of all manner of trifles that were of no earthly interest to David —yet it had been Becky's charm that she loved all those things that David loved, but which she never now mentioned, though sometimes Féo would timidly try to draw him out about his travels, in vain.

And covertly Becky would watch him—she had come to understand that a man can feel as much as a woman does, only he does not express it. We may learn the signs if we will—the closed pressed lips, the stifled sigh, the hidden moisture of the eye. Do you but put your hand in his, he loves you for understanding what he feels, but Becky was far from showing David any sign of sympathy, quite the contrary indeed.

"How perfectly hateful you can make yourself when you like," he said to her in a furious whisper, when presently she vowed that there was nothing in the whole world more genuinely admired, liked, and respected by the world, than a really great cocotte, who reckoned her lovers by the thousand, and whose expenditure, jewels, clothes, and caprices were on a Napoleonic scale. The

very proletariat is proud of her, and cheers her to the echo wherever she appears, or, as Becky averred—

> "Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
> She shall have music wherever she goes!"

And, after all, she concluded, "a loutish or brutal husband in polyandrous countries is unknown."

"I won't have you talk like that before Féo," he went on more angrily still; and Billy, who had never known the Becky that David knew, and was well used to the mordant tongue of his beloved, overhearing, dropped his eyeglass, and thought what devils of tempers these chaps from Africa had. Billy was emphatically a man, not of the desert, which purifies the eyes and heart, but subtle and of the wicked city, and conversation that David found indecent was to him merely amusing.

Becky laughed out enjoyingly; she never looked so happy as when she had just made somebody miserable.

Féo, watching David's face, tried to create a diversion by speaking of a certain play to which he had taken her recently, but unfortunately remarked that the leading actress in it was beginning to look decidedly old.

"Her life has written itself on her face," said Billy.

"It is not large enough," said Becky, who was in one of her worst moods. "Did I tell you I went to see Lena yesterday? She has a new admirer, and the house is freshly done up—*blue*. And the constancy of the married man is superhuman."

"To whom?"

"His mistress!"

"I'm awfully sorry for Lena," said Féo hurriedly, for David's face frightened her, "she married such a brute."

"Bright women always have imagination," said Becky, "and it's their ruin; a common-sense woman looks at a man, and turns her back; the imaginative idiot sees what she wants to see, and marries him. Unsatisfactory men would have *no* chance if there weren't so many bright women in the world."

"Women nowadays take jolly good care to destroy any halo of romance about themselves," said David warmly.

"I don't mean you, Féo," he added, for the two girls were changing places before his eyes, and the more he hated Becky, the closer (he hoped) Féo drew to him.

Her eyes were on his, and something strenuous shone out of her face, and made it beautiful—noble even, and looking at her, he felt a sudden wonder that he had not been able to love her before ever he saw Becky; afterwards, of course, it was impossible.

There are some intensely feminine natures, colourless, nebulous, like Féo's, that a strong man's nature can dye to any colour he pleases; but Becky's mind was emphatically her own, and she had yet to meet the man who could bring about any change in it; and David did not like an individuality so strong that of every thousand persons it would sweep nine hundred and ninety-nine into its net. . . . Becky might master Billy, but she should never master him.

"I didn't mean to class *you* with the unsatisfactory ones," said Becky coolly; "though sportsmen do not

make good lovers, they are apt to take a woman in their stride, and forget her. Unless," she added meditatively, "she gives a man a nasty back fall that breaks his bones, and forces him to remember her."

"As I told you before, your name suits you well," said David rudely; "Becky—Becky Sharp, for your tongue slays like a sword."

"David!" cried out Féo aghast, for she had never before seen any will as strong as David's come into conflict with his; but Becky laughed, and said it was positively refreshing to get the truth at first hand from a man.

"It's so cheap talking like that," he said, with a hot colour in his face; "and this I do know, that the nearer you get to civilisation, the farther you get from God. It would be a treat to listen to the talk of two of my Hottentot servants, after the spite and scandal that passes muster for conversation in almost every London drawing-room to-day, and as the talk is, so is the worthless record of the day's acts."

"That is true," said Becky, who had gone a little pale, but was by no means to be silenced. "Oh! we hear of a noble deed, and we catch our breath sharp for pride and delight; a wonderful discovery, and we say admiringly, 'How clever!' We see a beautiful woman, and exclaim, 'How lovely!' and then—next, please! We don't remember the noble thing, or the wonderful thing; we don't worship the woman, we see her as she will be to-morrow, with all her lovers gone; and yet, with all this hurry and weariness we are not really doing anything

—we are not producing anything great. Talk, and the worship of the Golden Calf, about fills up our days."

Billy looked at her keenly; he saw that she was talking for the sake of talking, and he thought she was putting it on a bit to shock the mighty hunter; and Féo looked wretched, for David's face was the clock by which she invariably set her heart. So now he effected a change of conversation by asking David if he had seen his portrait in the *Graphic* that day?

"There is also a weird legend about you in the accompanying letter-press," added Billy, "but no one seems quite clear as to what it is that has brought down on you the wrath of the gods—whether it is a jewel, or a scalp, or an amulet; but we are all certain it is not a mummy."

David laughed.

"Whatever it is," he said, "I have asserted my power to keep it; and when I go back, may return it or not, as I think fit."

Féo's eyes sparkled, but his next words turned her face to stone.

"I may have to run over—just there and back, you know," and he stretched out his hand kindly to her; "and I'm very keen on knowing if Walter has found that fortune," he added, and turned to Becky, meeting from her a look that struck him like a blow square between the eyes, for all the surcharged contempt for him that she had hidden during the past fortnight cried aloud in it, and he felt bruised all over, and shamed in his manhood, as if a pigmy had beaten him.

"And if you go alone," she said, and her voice cut like steel, "I would advise you not to come back."

She got up, and throwing down the new book she had been cutting with the dagger David had given her, she crossed over, and put her arms about Féo, who sat, a little shivering, hurt soul, in the midst of her useless loveliness and finery, and a sob arose in her throat at this spectacle of man's cruelty, and a woman's helplessness of real love.

"I would like to *beat* you, Becky," said David between his teeth; and with that he sprang up, and reaching the door, shook it in his hand as if it were a reed, and smiting on it a blow that had the strength of ten men in it, and which sounded like the crack of doom, he banged it behind him, and was gone.

"Lucky he didn't come across anybody," remarked Billy, "he'd have gone for 'em bald-headed—and killed 'em."

Becky laughed. The thunderclap of David's departure had cleared the air, and her spirits rose with a bound; then she saw that Féo was crying, and dabbing at real tears with a gossamer handkerchief as hopelessly inefficient as herself.

"He promised to take me back with him," she said between despairing sobs, "and if he is bound to be murdered, as they say he is, because he won't give up something he carries about him, I would like—would like—to be there, and—and protect him. Oh, you may laugh ('indeed I didn't,' said Becky gently), but love is a wonderful shield, and they should only get at him over my body."

Billy had turned aside. He was not, and never had

been, blind. He saw the tragedy beneath it all, and knew that he himself was involved in it, and for the thousandth time he cursed the fate that had sent him to Berlin, and Jane Pomeroy upstairs with the flu, while David and Becky had sat in this room, and come to an understanding of each other's hearts under the ægis of Quekett's protection, granted to serve his own ends.

Over the girl's bent head Billy waved his hand to Becky, and murmuring "Ta-ta till we meet at the Savoy to-morrow night," went on tip-toe away.

"Oh, perfect love!" thought Becky grimly. "Here are two women trying to save one selfish man from the consequences of his own folly, and he won't be saved."

"And if he goes alone I shall never see him again," said Féo. "There is no one like him. Do you ever see any one like him? He makes all other men look like feather-beds," she went on with unsuspected sarcasm. "He is not like the others of his class. Oh, I know them only too well. Even if he didn't love a woman, he would be good to her, and true to her. He has a temper, I know," she added appealingly to Becky, "but it's because he is so clean, and hates shams. He would not begin to lead a double life from the church door, and break my heart—be a bachelor with the comforts of home!"

Tears came into Becky's eyes as the poor little girl went on making her plea for the man who did not love her, . . . and yet she liked to hear him praised, to know that she was not the only one whom he had affected in

this way; . . . yet she also knew that the men who run straight are usually hard and unlovable, . . . it is the facile ones who are kind at home, . . . and David in a passion was something to give any woman pause.

But the more he hated her, the better he would like Féo, and Becky was not Walter's sister for nothing. Having put her hand to the plough, she had no intention of looking back.

"Come upstairs and powder your nose," she said, "and tell Mr. David that he may go to Africa, or the devil, but that when he comes back he won't find *you*. Though women are fixtures, and men are movables, it's the quantity of useless things we get round us, I suppose, that fetters us."

On the way to the door they met Quekett with the strangely belated tea, and something in his face, ivory white as his bald head, struck Becky sharply.

"A crisis has come in his affairs," she thought, with an uneasy memory of Martha's door locked against her when yesterday she had gone down to see her. But Féo just then entirely occupied her mind, and the Queketts receded to await a more convenient season.

CHAPTER XII

"Ah, love! could you and I with time conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits, and then
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire?"

David caught Becky alone the following morning, and a battle royal raged between them, but the girl was the coolest and her tongue the sharpest, for when a strong man *does* let himself go, he is not to be stopped, nor does he stop himself, in a hurry.

"Coarse, unwomanly!" cried David, his very tone breathing insult. "You have no sense of shame, or you would not dare say the things you do. And it's easy enough to get crowds of men about you; it's another thing to make them respect you. Behind your back they call you good fun."

"Do they?" said Becky, delighted smiles breaking out round her mouth. "If they'll put themselves in my hands for a week, I'll soon show them whether they or I are the best fun!"

"At dinner the other night you described how you once saw a man playing hockey in a tall hat, and a pair of drawers."

"Well, so he did," affirmed Becky, nodding. "He had a few other odds and ends on, of course, but those were the things that hit you in the eye, the hat and the—ahem,

breeches. Whenever I hear or see an amusing thing, I always pass it on; it discounts a little of the world's dulness; why don't *you?*"

"Féo would never dream of saying such things," went on David furiously, "or any other well-bred woman I know."

"And you are going to marry Féo," said Becky, "and we Bethunes are not well-bred; *that* is the hall-mark of the timid and commonplace."

"Thank you for Féo," he said drily.

"But not for yourself," put in Becky smartly. "Well, if you must know, I want to choke off Kelmersdale & Co. I dislike him and all his kind; those cold, dark, lean, used-up men, buttoned-up, top-coated men *I* call them, full of pockets, and every pocket full of secrets; they exhale stale memories, frowsy intrigues. You feel instinctively that those pockets are hiding-places for nasty things. Next to these are the men who have full pockets certainly, but wear their coats carelessly, and flying open; best of all are those who forget them altogether, and let the clean wind sweep through every nook and cranny of their minds and bodies."

"You know too much," cried David. "One would think some man had used you very ill."

Becky laughed.

"I have always had my own way," she said, "always mastered my lovers; do you think I would *let* one come near enough to ill-use me?"

For a moment he looked at her, then he said drily—

"No, I don't; you are a real Becky Sharp, well able to take care of yourself," at which she laughed, and said she

was proud to be even a bad copy of so great an original, and he retorted that he found himself continually looking round for Dobbin and Lord Stair.

"Billy will do for Dobbin," said Becky, "but you're not clever enough for Lord Stair. Kelmersdale is better." She turned away to the window, and hummed reflectively—

> "Beautiful snow! Beautiful snow!
> Oh! how I would like a revolver to go
> For the man wot wrote about 'beautiful snow!'"

Some women have napes to their necks, all have polls, but only a woman whose head is splendidly set on her shoulders, and whose hair grows in the seven peaks of beauty, owns the fineness and delicacy of a *nuque*, and David had plenty of time to observe this beauty in Becky, as she sang protestingly, to all appearance having forgotten that he was present.

He stood looking helplessly at her as if she were a dissolving show—*this* the natural little girl who had never so much as made an eye at him, only been *bon camarade*—this beauty in her daringly-cut, white cloth gown, with a blazing knot of scarlet geranium at her throat, every turn of the illuminated face, and insolently-poised figure, full of devilry and charm, something to beat, to kiss, to kill, the only woman in the world who had ever stood up to him yet.

David made a passionate gesture of anger as she turned and faced him laughing.

"That sort of thing may be your idea of wit," he said, "it isn't mine."

"No," said Becky sympathisingly, "wit never was much in your line."

"Then you remarked *à propos* of a pair of lovers near, that man was exactly like a tom cat; when courting he was all alive, but when he wasn't courting he sulked, and made himself a nuisance at home, like a cantankerous married man!"

"What a memory you have," said Becky in admiring wonder; "really I had no idea I said so many smart things. I'll buy you a notebook, and you shall be Boswell to my Johnson, and publish it, and we'll divide the swag!"

"There are plenty more," said David, who was striding about the room. "You told Melville that you thought it would be lovely to be *born* a rich widow."

"So I do; cut the cackle and come to the h'osses, you know," murmured Becky sweetly.

David fairly clenched his hands with rage.

"And you call yourself a decent woman," he said, with a sneer that made him positively hideous.

"No, an indecent one. They get on so much better in life. For instance, an honest woman hasn't a chance of marrying off her girls well, but the one who has never run straight, gets all the very best men about her, and marries them to her daughters."

He strode over, and seized her wrists in both hands, and that overpowering sense of his great strength at close quarters once more overcame her. Involuntarily she thought of Jane Pomeroy's dictum that the male statues in Rome were so much more beautiful in their clean symmetry of line and muscle than those of women ever

could be. And she felt puny and contemptible beside this angry, sunny-haired young god, who had come down from Olympus on purpose to give her a good shaking.

"You little devil! how *dare* you?" he said between his teeth, "how dare you?"

"And you," she said in a low intense voice, her face almost touching his, and royally her scorn became her—"you, whom at least I thought different to other men—what are you? Why, you are not even a good sportsman! You call it a sportsmanlike thing to come in here under a false name, and to be marrying and bullying a poor girl who loves you, for a living; with your big game expeditions, your scraps of liberty, and skins and things, flung to you as sugar-plums? Pah! you have not observed even the rules of the game. Walter has a better idea of honour—and so have I! And the rules of loyalty a man applies to one woman, he usually applies to all!"

He took her by the shoulders and shook her—he was mad then. She had tried too far a nature as elemental and savage as her own, and as she gasped, he loosed her, and, taking her hands, beat them with his own.

"You are strong enough to bear it," he said grimly. And so she was, and richly deserved her punishment.

At that moment she realised that here was a man ages ahead of her in real experience, and that she had found her master at last. Suddenly he flung away from her, aghast at himself, and held out his hands trembling as with palsy towards her.

"See what you have done," he said. "You have provoked me into making a beast of myself—twice you have

made me do it—besides ruining my temper—when I struck the door the other day, and now—the only occasions in all my life when I have completely lost self-control. And if I can't make *you* ashamed, you have made *me*."

Becky had turned her back on him, she dared not look at him, be kind and womanly, just herself, or she would undo the whole fabric she had laboured at so unflinchingly during the past weeks.

"You don't allow for *my* disappointment," she said, her voice gaining strength as it went on. "You were angry with me because I knew my world—because I see you men as you really are—because I had never found a man yet, who did not encourage a woman to be a liar, instead of confirming the good in her. But you were different. With you I could be myself—you seemed to be primitive, like Walter, and of clean mind, and thoughts, and habits—you had the faults of the savage, but none of the vices of civilisation—or perhaps it was the contrast of my own townishness and wickedness, but I *liked* you." Her voice changed; she knew that she had smitten him hip and thigh, and a woman is so much more used to knock-down blows, and bears them so much better than a man does.

"Well," he said, "I've done wrong, and I'm punished for it. You were the first girl I had ever met I could make a real chum of—I did not know there was a woman like you in the world—and you never said sharp things till lately—but the disappointment is not all on your side."

"No," she said, "no." It struck her then that it is a disadvantage to be intellectually superior to a man—it is so impossible to follow him along masculine lines of ignorance, and one gets out of touch with him so much more easily.

She sighed impatiently, but unfortunately their eyes met, and David exclaimed—

"Oh! I know you in every mood and fibre, Becky. I know you down to the ground; and you may pretend as you please, but you can't hide your real intrinsic goodness—*my* being a sweep will not make you one."

"You are wrong," said Becky harshly; and she was usually successful in what she did, because she struck first, and thought after. "It is Féo who is good and feminine, and loving. You will be able to write your own character all over her, which is precisely what a man like you wants. And no one in the world will ever love you one half as well as she does."

She would not trust her eyes again, but her face defied him. Though he searched it closely, he could not find in it what he wanted. Then he said—

"Poor Féo, poor little toy, what a mistake to give it a heart. A vital spark escaped and entered a toy-shop, but somehow the brains were forgotten."

"And a true heart is worth all the brains in the world," cried Becky hotly, "a man wants a home, not a library to live in. And she is so frail," she added with a sudden appeal to his strength, "why did she go to St. Moritz? And yet she is willing to face the hardships of the desert at your side."

David had turned very white. Becky seemed to be able to get him on the raw on every possible occasion, and perhaps her last argument was to him, as a man, the most formidable of all.

"The men who have wanted to marry her, during the five years you have been away, would reach in single *queue* from here to Hyde Park Corner," said Becky, "and she has not even kept count of them—her dear dog's eyes of love were turned unswervingly towards Africa—oh! have you never looked at them?" she cried impatiently. "Those eyes that are rarely seen in a human head—holding all the devotion, the limitless patience, the utter abnegation of self, and capacity for silent suffering that look at you out of the head of the right kind of dog?"

David moved impatiently, and Becky felt that she hated him at that moment; were men always to keep their best for one another, as women for women?

"She is a good little girl," he said, "but it is all a mistake, and if it were not for my promise to my mother——"

He paused, and as he stood there a gleam of December sunshine touched his wonderful hair, and Becky got a sudden revelation of him as a boy at his mother's knee: by the sons of nice mothers shall we know what manner of women were they, . . . and yet this one had tied a camel's load about his neck with her dying hands, and a great wave of pity for him flowed over Becky's heart.

"Why did you promise?" she said; "*no one* has any right to demand such a sacrifice, yet you might be in

worse hands, and it will all be the same a hundred years hence," she added a little drearily.

"And if you are thinking of marrying Billy," he said, with a touch of childishness in his savage pain, "you have put your money on the wrong horse. He is a drawing-room man—he neither hunts nor shoots straight —but he understands women——"

"There are so many—Billys and Kelmersdales," she said coolly.

Once more he faced the flippant Becky in which instinct told him she had disguised the true one for purposes best known to herself, and a sudden imperative desire to disentangle the two, and know which was genuine, overcame him, as he exclaimed—

"What is it that has cankered you so—what has made you so hard—you who can be so womanly? For a mere girl, I never knew any one with so vile a belief in man, and I have only confirmed it," he added bitterly. "Walter did you a lot of good—and then I came, and you took me for granted as being on Walter's simple, noble lines, which I am not."

Becky stood arrested, looking at him as at something dark suddenly become illuminating. Yes, it had been her fault—a woman's usual generous blunder—to form an ideal, and blindfold dress it up to suit her fancy, never even glancing at its superstruction — and David had fallen in with her whim, and let things slide, as is the manner of man, even at his best.

"You ask why I am hard," she said slowly, "and bitter and worldly—and I am all three, and more and

more; well, I am the Benjamin of a big family, and you do not know what *our* family is, or half the tragedies of it. The fairies came to our christenings and gave us all good gifts, and last of all they set a little black cross against each one of us, and it undoes all the good they gave us, and not one of us has ever lived to be happy, not one will die happy—scarce one of us in our beds. The curse goes on to the next generation too, and one has been murdered, and of all who have died, not one has been old; and who shall say what shall come to the rest? I have sisters who married when I was in my cradle, and one of them whom I loved passionately—the brightest and best of us all——" she paused, and turned her head aside, and her mouth drew up a little at one corner in a spasm of pain; "*her* life has bitten deep into mine, and it has frightened me of men, and love, and marriage for ever and ever."

The luncheon gong boomed through the house at that moment, and David took his hat, then put it down, and the lines about his face softened as he stooped and took both her little hands in his.

"I have beaten you this morning, and we shall sit at table together at the Savoy to-night," he said, "but if you could look inside, you would see that I am black and blue, while there are no marks here," and then he did what she had once triumphantly said to herself he could never do to any woman, he covered both these ill-used hands with kisses, and departed.

CHAPTER XIII

"The hearts to dare are quick to feel,
The hands that wound are soft to heal."

In the low-pitched, heavily ornamented room, crammed to suffocation with the pick of the earth in beauty, position, wealth, and wickedness, with not only those who are notorious to-day, but those who will be infamous to-morrow, Jane Pomeroy, glancing round her table near the door, frowned at the empty place representing David Moray, that had imperilled by at least ten minutes the great Joseph's conception of a good dinner.

But those minutes of waiting being up, and Joseph himself, with his gentle, sensitive face, and magnetic personality, having inquired her wishes, hearing for whom they waited (for David was a *persona grata* here as everywhere else), had suggested in vain a few moments more of grace, but Jane was obdurate, and now they had begun, and that brisk hum of conversation which points to a specially cheery night at the Savoy, filled the air.

No one seemed to miss David, so intent were they all on eating, watching the endless procession of diners come and go, and listening to Boldi's music with its intoxicating dash and spirit, as played by his passionate, roving-eyed men, for to every Rigo his Princess de Chimay, thus

do these Hungarians argue, and the more beautiful and rich the woman, the more capricious she is certain to be, and the more likely to throw down everything to follow her low-born lover to the world's end.

Féo did not appear greatly concerned at David's absence, she was quite used to disappointments from him, which is a parlous state for a maid to get into, and apt to encourage dry-rot in the manners and affections of her lover. But Becky was very silent, and did not, as usual, note the thousand tragedies and comedies passing around, mark the silent death of an absorbing passion, the birth of an intrigue, the chances of adventure tossed from eye to eye as a juggler plays with his knives, suddenly changing the life of that man or this woman.

They did not interest her, these people who ate, drank, and were merry, quite determined that on the morrow they would not die, but begin it all over again, though what weariness, what satiety and despair, lay hidden in the breasts of many of the feasters! They would pass out, and some day they would not return, but others would come, and the room would continue to be a microcosm representing the whole world of men and women who live and die in a crowd, not because it makes them happy, but because it unfits them for any other kind of existence.

And in the midst of it all, of the music, the light, and the movement, there suddenly rushed over Becky an overpowering sense of disaster, of danger . . . something had stepped close, fiercely menacing her, or what she loved . . . where was David? Why had Quekett in-

sisted on their dining here to-night instead of at home . . . this was farther away than Prince's, and the other places, . . . and he had lately looked a desperate man, who would do anything for money . . . what was that moving behind the curtain . . . and the thing David carried, and that made him a marked man, was wanted . . . her imagination flashed like lightning down the track upon which the warning of her senses had set her, hers had always been the gift of something very like second sight, and at that moment she *saw* David in danger, and standing in the drawing-room in Hill Street.

She said quietly to Billy, under cover of the music, "I can't breathe in this hot room—take me out quickly," and Billy, who was cool and dexterous in matters of the kind, had her out of the room almost before they were missed.

Becky was quite pale enough to excuse her plea of faintness, and when she had fetched her cloak, and made him put her into a hansom, insisted on his going back to the others, and, by force or stratagem, preventing Jane Pomeroy following her.

"If she does, I'll never speak to you again," she said, and knowing Becky, he did not attempt to go with her, though, as he watched the cab drive swiftly away, he would not have been human if he had not connected her sudden departure with David's mysterious absence.

She had no latch-key, then remembered the little side door so frequently used by Quekett, and that more than once she had seen ajar; . . . but would not the enemy have securely locked itself in, and sent all the servants

out? And to ring at the front-door bell might only precipitate a tragedy, if one had not already occurred.

She dismissed the cab a few doors off, and muffling her face in her hood, stole towards the house, that looked blank and silent save for the light in the hall. The side entrance was fast shut. She tried the area gate, and to her joy found it unlocked, then gathering up her skirts, ran swiftly down the steps, and finding the door at the bottom slightly open, dashed into the labyrinthine passages, that were almost dark, and struck cold as ice. They were perfectly silent, too, as though not a soul were in the place, and the swing door made no sound as she passed through it, but surely there were sounds above . . . she loosened and flung down the cloak that hampered her, flew up the stairs, and dashed in at the drawing-room to find David struggling in the grasp of a half-naked Indian, while Quekett, with his back to the door, stood looking impartially on, much as his great original might do at a highly satisfactory rehearsal.

Quicker than lightning acted Becky's eye and brain, and snatching up the dagger lying near on an open book, she struck hard with it once, twice, thrice, at the brown thing twisted like a snake about David's body, and David jerking away the cord round his neck, shouted out—

"Bravo, Becky! You have done a very sporting thing!"

And Quekett stole out of the room, and out of the life that knew him, a ruined man. But Becky saw neither him, nor the brown thing that writhed itself away towards the curtain and under it, and out of sight. For the

moment she was blind and drunk with blood . . . she had struck hard and spared not, and she had killed a man. And David saw nothing but her—the incident of the danger was a trifle—he was a match for the two men—it was important only for the light it had thrown on the girl's character, and he came back then to his first impression of her, and more, in all the devotion, the pluck, the unselfishness of the complete woman.

Suddenly she began to tremble, there was blood on her hand, and their eyes met . . . on the very spot where they had hurled their insults at each other that morning, he now sat down, and drew her to his knee, and she made no resistance, only helplessly leaned her forehead against his, and clung fast to him . . . his strong young arms seemed to prevent her falling in pieces, or going mad . . . she had done an inhuman thing, and he was purely human . . . sheer terror of her work, and a profound sense of safety in his arms for awhile blotted out every thought and sensation, but presently she freed herself, and rose, pushing the heavy hair away from her still blanched face.

"Would you like to beat me again?" she said with a wan smile that trembled hard on tears.

"I would rather kiss you than beat you," he said.

Suddenly his face changed.

This was neither the old Becky with whom he had been *bon camarade* in this room, nor the new one whom he had so passionately admired and despised, and insulted that morning . . . this was the woman . . . the woman he loved.

Real love, real suffering is not dramatic, it is terrible, it is ugly, it stutters, it gurgles; it is only when reason holds control of the emotions that they make harmony: those who love most, are powerless to express it; . . . and in this tremendous wave of passion that swept over the man who had hitherto hated women were elements of pain and fear, and even anger at his own helplessness, and only broken, incoherent words escaped him.

They loved one another—overmasteringly, hopelessly—beyond the power of anything but their own fiercely-beating hearts to interpret; they loved one another, and this one moment was theirs, snatched out of the waste of barren years that had come before, and would come after, . . . but Becky, hiding her face, thanked God that the moment of self-revelation had not come to each at the same moment.

"It was love," cried out David suddenly and loudly; "love will make you do anything, and you and I did not know it; it was love that made us brutes to one another, that made me beat you this morning, because if I had not beaten you, I must have kissed you."

But Becky's eyes, her upraised hand fought him back—a certain cold, clear courage came to her then—and she laughed, actually laughed, and watched him with cruel eyes as the light went slowly out of his face.

"Poor Féo," she said; "what can she see in you, I wonder?" and she looked at him searchingly, insolently, as if she were committing every line of his face to memory, afterwards to make a sketch of him, the reverse of heroic.

"You will always think of your horses before her; you will not be tender or sentimental, but you will be strong, and brave, and clean; love will only be a part of, never the paramount thing in your life: sport will come first, and you will always be disgustingly selfish—good sportsmen always are."

David winced, then strode up to her, and put both hands gently on her bare, delicate shoulders, and looked in her face.

"You lie, Becky," he said; "you know that this applies only to Féo—to other women, not to you—and before God, I would rather kill you than see you any other man's wife than mine."

Becky weakened under his touch; she tried to speak, and neither of them could afterwards have told what they said, or how they said it—they were facing each other with shaking lips, that stammered, when, by a supreme effort, she got a grip of herself, and said harshly—

"You do not know me; if you did, you would not love me; though in any case that is useless. There is a devil in me, chained and curbed, but one day he would break loose, and face the man I loved, and if the man were not the stronger, if he did not love me enough, I should create hell for him."

"And I would rather have hell with you than heaven with any other woman," said David, who had hitherto put women out of his category of sport—they were toys only—but now this wild, untameable thing woke in him the fierce instinct of pursuit, and as woman and quarry alike, he must overtake her.

"And what of your promise to your dying mother?" said Becky quietly.

His hands dropped, and he turned away, struck by a mere splinter of the mill-stones between which (like many another woman) she was being ground. No woman had hitherto made him suffer, and he did not understand it.

"If Féo releases me —" he began, and Becky cried out to herself fiercely that Billy would have understood better, but it is not always the men who understand them that girls love, or the wheels of the Juggernaut, beneath which millions of women's hearts are crushed, would stand motionless for ever and ever.

And frankly, David could not see the tragedy of the situation. He was young, masterful, rather reckless, and used to having his own way; and now that he had suddenly discovered that he was in love with Becky, and shrewdly suspected she was in love with him, he had no idea that any such rubbishing word as "farewell" should be spoken between them. He had never supposed himself capable of a grand passion—real sportsmen seldom are—but Becky had bitten deep into him, with her alternate torments and delight, and fairly swept him off his feet by her act of devotion; and it did not put him off that Becky was at that moment trying to make herself look and be, as odious as she could, as she had looked that morning, in fact, when she cheeked him so outrageously.

The blood on her brave little hand, on the Aubusson carpet, proved her love, even while she denied it, but as he turned quickly towards her, the front-door bell

clanged furiously out, reminding Becky that Jane Pomeroy and the others were returning to find herself and David Moray keeping house alone together.

"Go and open it," she said, and her voice was lifeless, for through that door Féo would come in with her claims upon David; by that door to-morrow she herself would go out a defeated soldier, whose courage had not held out to the bitter end.

"Pick up the dagger," she exclaimed sharply, alarmed at what she saw in David's face, and as involuntarily he obeyed her, she slipped from the room, and gained her own just in time to turn the key upon him.

CHAPTER XIV

"Say not good night, but in some brighter clime
Bid me good morning."

DAVID went downstairs, opened the door, and flung it wide. A little gay coloured crowd seemed to be running up the steps, but Billy arrived first, exclaiming—

"Miss Bethune?"

David pointed over his shoulder. He looked remarkably cool and collected, as, ignoring Féo (how could he bear that doll after the bundle of nerves and brain and heart he had just held in his arms?), he offered his hand to Jane Pomeroy, who was in a bad temper, and inquiring irritably why Quekett was not at his post.

"Ah—Quekett," said David meditatively, "we'll talk about that 'inside," and he told the coachman to go home, and almost carried Jane up the steps in a way that women, and especially middle-aged women, liked. It did not seem to occur to him to apologise for receiving her in her own house, while she and the rest had been waiting dinner for him elsewhere; but when they all got in, he ushered them into the study, because, as he incidentally mentioned, "the drawing-room was in a mess."

Cleopatterer, delicately lovely as usual, and deposited by him in the easiest of chairs, was furious at his taking no notice of Féo, and Billy looked as if his dinner had

disagreed with him, for after all it is not soothing to a lover's vanity when his best girl leaves her place at table beside him, to spend an hour or two alone at home with another man, and Becky was not visible, a damning sign that for once she was not able to take her own part.

Jane Pomeroy waited grimly for David's explanation, and he stood by the mantelpiece steadying his nerves a bit before making it. The greatest tempest of emotion he had ever known in his life had shaken him more than he knew, and his voice was a little unsteady when at last he began to speak.

"A letter was brought to my chambers to-night," he said, addressing Jane Pomeroy, "just as I was dressing to meet you at the Savoy, apparently from yourself. You said you had received bad news—that you had put off the dinner—and would I come round here at 8.30, as you wished most particularly to see me? Of course I had not time to dine, and when I arrived, Quekett showed me in here, murmured something about telling the ladies, and withdrew. I was sitting with my back to the curtains, thinking, when a dexterously-thrown noose over my head announced that my old friend, the Indian, aided by Mr. Quekett, who at that moment walked composedly in, had come up with me at last. I got my fingers inside the cord—that game had been played on me before, and of course I knew what they were after—" he touched his breast-pocket, where was that ugly bulge which always discounted so grievously the joint benefactions of Nature and his tailor.

"Let me see it," said Féo softly. But Cleopatterer

shrieked at the idea, and with her delicate ankle displayed at precisely the right angle, summoned up all her energies for a fit of those hysterics that at sixteen were so effectual.

"*Quekett*," said Jane Pomeroy, thinking aloud, and her lips trembled—*that* concerned her more nearly than anything else. To replace Omar Khayám with a cookery-book at her time of life was certainly the cruellest blow that Fate could possibly deal her.

"Billy, may I trouble you to ring the bell?" she said, ignoring David in a woman's perfectly reasonable way. But for that young man and his relics, probably Quekett had not fallen.

"The women have all been sent out," said David imperturbably. "There appears to be no one in the house but ourselves."

Billy stuck in his eyeglass, and looked attentively at the young man who was doing the honours of the house. If she had reason to suspect danger to David, why hadn't Becky stayed comfortably at home to look after him instead of making a break to the Savoy and back? So far, he did not see where she came in.

"And then," said David, in the enjoying tone of one who describes a happy sporting incident, "at exactly the right moment, Becky dashed in, and carved up the Indian beautifully with that dagger I gave her, but she didn't finish him, though I hardly think either he or Quekett are below at the present moment."

Jane Pomeroy rose, and lighting a candle, demanded his arm. She was trembling very much, smitten to the

heart by her unworthy servant's betrayal of the implicit trust she had reposed in him. Billy said to himself hers was not the least of the tragedies of which the room was full that night. He dared not even think of his own, but glanced aside at Cleopatterer's, which was the grotesque one of the woman who is a fool, and does not know it, and at Féo's, the eternal one of the woman who loves the man who will never love her.

"I must see Martha," said Jane; "I could always depend on Martha, but she has been ill, and Quekett would not let me go down; he said he was nursing her himself."

It was characteristic of Quekett's rule that Jane never asked questions of her women as to what went on below stairs; whatever the Sultan did there was right in her eyes, and the maids, knowing there was no appeal, never dreamed of making any complaint against him.

David wrapped her cloak about her before she moved steadily on to the swing door, took the candle from her, and gave her his arm, making her lean on him as they went down the stairs, for a heavy fear was upon her that weighted her steps.

What had that quiet, capable woman Martha been about all through the events of this evening? She who had always been able to keep Quekett in check, and preserve the appearance of order, was not likely to countenance deeds of violence; involuntarily she turned towards the housekeeper's bedroom, but no light showed; all was silent within, the door was shut, and beyond it was—what?

The eternity-old terror of what lies couchant behind the shut door thrilled poor Jane—that thrill of an intangible fear which is perhaps more a shrinking of the spirit than the flesh, and is at the bottom of all our eager search after the unknown, where the door is the symbol of mystery that for ever shuts us out.

"Let me go in alone," she said, and he set the light in her hand.

As she opened the door, the taint of death in the air met her, and out of the darkness showed on a pillow Mrs. Quekett's calm, white face, and Jane Pomeroy went nearer, and saw marks of strangulation on the throat . . . she had been dead at least three days.

She had refused to be an accomplice, and she had been removed; there was no fear that Quekett would ever return to *that*.

Then Jane knelt down, and prayed beside that lonely figure on the bed, and David, who had gone on, and safely locked the doors communicating with the street, could hear her words and sobs as he came back, and waited without. He kissed her cheek, as a son might, when she came at last, and locked the door after her, and he looked away from the kind face as he took her upstairs.

They found Cleopatterer bolt upright, and eager for a fresh instalment of what she called the private theatricals of the evening, and nothing would satisfy her but a history of the Thing.

David, pale and indifferent, obliged her. He did not care who knew about, or had, the cursed relic now, that

had made him a marked man in Africa, and caused him to be tracked down here to-night; he was conscious only of Becky upstairs behind that locked door; Becky, who had sat on his knee, and denied her love insistently.

"Indians," he began, "on killing each other in their numerous wars, cut off the heads of their dead enemies, and place them in a caldron of red-hot sandstone to cover the orifice. By this process the bone of the head dissolves, and the head itself becomes reduced to about an eighth of its original size, preserving on a smaller scale the hair, the lineaments, the scars, and marks, exactly as they were during life. This process, though known to the whites, cannot be performed by them, as the Indians alone are in possession of the requisites. But Indians are sometimes, if rarely, to be found in Africa, and in one of my expeditions I fell in with an old Indian, and a girl—and a younger Indian named Pullenchiri, who was in love with the girl. She was very pretty, and she hated the fellow like poison—would not look at him at any price."

"She was quite right," said Cleopatterer, with a cardboard simper; "I refused dozens of men, Féo, before I accepted your poor papa."

"Well, the old Indian, Chumbi, whose avarice had taken him to the Witwatersrand before it was well opened up (and you see a sample of every race under the sun in Africa), had brought with him, from his native jungle, the preserved head of his deadliest enemy, one Maijarco, whom he had himself slain in battle, and night and day he never parted with his treasure, which he kept on his own person.

"My men had heard of some good sport at a distance, and we were moving on next morning, when I was wakened out of my sleep by having some small and hairy substance thrust into my hand, while the Indian girl's voice whispered imploringly in my ear (and I knew enough Indian to understand her), 'Take it away—take it to England; father will send Pullenchiri to seek for it, and make me the price of his finding it, and if you refuse to give it up, I shall not be forced into marrying the man I detest.'

"I was only half awake, and promised, and fell dead asleep, and when I woke up in the morning, the wretched thing had rolled into the hollow of my back, but I hid it as I dressed, for the girl was pretty, and I was sorry for her."

He paused, and Féo, looking at his down-bent, sunny head wondered shrewdly, had the poor Indian girl loved him? Did she give him that talisman, not only to save herself from Pullenchiri, but because she hoped David might bring it back some day, and so she would see his face again?

"Well, she had drugged the old man, and the theft was not discovered until twenty-four hours after I left; but before that, everything went wrong with us—we had one or two quite inexplicable accidents, and the men muttered that a curse was upon us, and when Pullenchiri came up with us, and openly accused me of having stolen a fetish, imploring me to give it back, things were fairly in train for the reputation of carrying a curse with me, that afterwards became mine.

"Of course I kicked the Indian out; but he came back, and his whines and prayers haunted us; all across Africa he followed us, for these people were rich, if not in money, in diamonds; but once in England, I thought I had broken the trail. My first visit was here, to bring Walter Bethune's letter to his sister;" he paused, and a suspicion of how matters really stood, pierced Cleopatterer's shallow brain . . . she knew that David had never really cared for Féo, but his indifference had lately become more marked; and whose fault was it, pray, but this pert, nobody of a Becky, who had really nothing whatever to recommend her but the accident of brains, and the priceless gift of style?

"Perhaps from my coming here straight, the Indian who followed me thought it was my home; and Quekett, whom I have always mistrusted, at first was only willing to help the Indian get back what he wanted. One day he stumbled against me when handing me coffee, and I distinctly felt his hand touch my breast pocket; thus he made sure that I carried the thing about with me, and at the end he got drawn in, and meant to stick at nothing."

"I think," said Cleopatterer, with a delicious anticipatory shudder that set all the diamonds on her head trembling, "that I should like to see it, even if it *does* make me faint."

"Hold on then," said David, and drew a small round chamois-leather bag out of his pocket.

Instantly a flood of long, fine, silky black hair fell over his hand, and they saw what looked like a fine cast of a

man's head in bronze on a very small scale, with every mark, wrinkle, wound, and characteristic vivid on it as in life.

Féo took it in her hand without fear, and mused over it. "Oh! you great warrior," she said, "with all the marks of your battles, and scars of victory on you, to dwindle to this! to be held in the hollow of a white woman's hand!"

She stroked the straight silken hair that fell like a veil about the cruel, wise little face, and before Cleopatterer had recovered herself sufficiently to shriek, a timid ring came at the front-door bell, and when David opened it, a drove of startled women, terrified at finding the area-gate locked, their Sultan absent, their mistress returned, flocked in in all their finery, and tried to efface themselves as quickly as possible.

But Jane Pomeroy, standing in the study door, arrested their steps.

"Where have you been?"

"To the Gaiety, ma'am," said the woman who waited on her, but yet was not her maid, as Jane preferred being her own mistress; "Mr. Quekett treated us all. He said you had given permission, as you were dining out."

"You can go to bed," said Jane, and they went, whispering; but true to her creed, she asked them not a single question.

Quekett might be gone, but his traditions hung in the air, and her heart sunk as she thought of the morrow.

"Take it to the museum," Féo was saying when she returned, while Billy wrapped Cleopatterer in a wrap as

consummate as her own mawkishness; but David would not promise, only slipped the outraged warrior into his pocket, and then Feo's composure broke, and slighted and wounded, she threw the ermine cape of her cloak about her lovely head to hide her tears, and followed her mother without a word.

Though David, having found a hansom, and put them into it, spoke kindly enough to her on saying good-night, she knew unerringly that some great change had been wrought in him during the past few hours, and that this was a new David, with whom she had completely lost touch. And had not Becky saved his life that night—had she not somehow known his danger when no one else did? And with some faint glimmer of the truth, it seemed to Féo that by every right David was now Becky's, not hers—if indeed he ever had belonged to her at all.

And Lady Surrenden, who had a heart, even if she were a first-class fool, was for the moment pungent and not gelatinous, when she said with energy—

"Why can't that odious Becky leave David alone, and stick to Billy Carrington?"

Meanwhile Jane Pomeroy was saying to Billy, "Murder has been attempted here to-night, and murder actually done some time during the past three days. Will you arrange about the Coroner?" and she briefly told him the truth.

"It was arranged that Becky should go to her mother to-morrow," she said, "and I shall not tell her about what is below stairs," for she had always a horror of associating death and its gruesomeness with young lives.

"My blithe little Becky, what are those lines about a bird in the wilderness, 'unfettered and free'? She makes herself happy on the smallest provocation, but happiness is not for the Bethunes, nor, it seems, for me."

"I shall go down and see her at Lavenders," said Billy, and his spirits rose.

"Why not?" said Jane absently. For the time being, all other affairs were thrust out of her mind by the pressing horror of Quekett's criminality and Martha's death.

Then she sent Billy away, and he paused for a word on the doorstep with David, who was coming in.

"It was a near thing?" said Billy.

"Not at all. The only thing that made the incident remarkable was Miss Bethune's pluck."

But Billy, as he went down the steps, remembered that just now David had called her Becky.

CHAPTER XV

"If a man have not some great ideal, such as a religious illusion, a love for science, a craze for art, a passion for charity, one of those all-absorbing delights of the soul, he redescends into instinct, begins to live for the day passing over his head, and appeals to satisfactions of a gross nature, but prompt and certain. They will kill him perhaps, but what is it that does not in the long run kill? And since men must move towards death by whatever road they take, why not select the pleasantest; and what matters it whether the end be reached a little sooner, or a little later? Who knows even whether the short cut is not after all the best?"

BECKY had been at Lavenders a clear nineteen hours. She had revelled in cold fruit puddings, prayers, needlework, improving conversation, and last and best her mother's silent delight in having her there; and if she mistook exhaustion for peace, she yet felt as if her muddied soul had got into a sun-bath of goodness, and might even come out reasonably clean in the long run.

As she sat at breakfast on the morning after her arrival, she glanced kindly along the row of elderly faces opposite her. A man's cursory glance would have dubbed it old and ugly, but then there is no sneer too gross for man against women in the lump.

Mrs. Bethune was not present, she never came down to breakfast; a whole day of her own sex was quite enough for her, without facing it the first thing in the morning, as she was wont quite openly to remark.

The room was wide and spacious, like all the rooms at Lavenders, and the old-fashioned window opened in the middle, showing a belt of glorious trees, a green lawn, a bit of village, and a peep of the squat tower of the unmistakable old Suffolk church in the distance.

The table silver and china were all spotless, brightened by a sharp note of colour in the winter berries and chrysanthemums grouped in masterly fashion, but Becky was not eating the tremendous breakfast she usually did when encouraged by experience to put her trust in the eggs.

Presently she glanced at the really good etchings on the walls, then turned to look affectionately at her own particular one that hung on the left-hand side of the fireplace. It represented a very long flight of steps leading up to a small keep or tower, and Becky never saw it without thinking how lovely it would be to stand at the top, and pour hot oil or treacle down on the visitors one could see coming, and whom one most particularly did not wish to let in.

She had mentioned this unholy desire one day at dinner, and her mother had delivered one of those sharp thrusts with her forefinger that she had ready for Becky's unorthodox remarks, and that always gave the girl a pain in her side. It was a lamentable fact that the more godly the society Becky was in, the worse she behaved, while with really vicious people she retired into her shell, and was quite unapproachable.

She always tried to bear in mind Gerald du Barri's dictum that "it is better to be dumb, than not to be

understood," but if she were pleased or cross, or anything special struck her, out it came, when usually it would have been much better if it had stayed at home. Occasionally a bright woman would appear at Lavenders, and be to Becky as water in a thirsty land, or a heliograph that winked information unintelligible to the world at large; but usually she had to rest her soul on the real simple goodness of the people there, and if sometimes she found it stodgy, like the pastry, she knew the fault was entirely her own.

And the excellent woman who sat at the head of the table and made the puddings, and ruled the house, and was one of the most naturally clever women, quite unspoiled by culture, that Becky had ever known, took no more count of the girl than of the humblest old maid present. She valued people solely by the religion they displayed, and God came first, and every one else a bad second; and in the class she held, Becky stood at the very bottom. The girl's smartness was worldliness, her mobile beauty a real misfortune to herself, and her tongue was (*vide* Scripture) the source of all evil.

And Becky honestly admired the capable woman; she thought it must be lovely to be so cock-sure of your own niche in the next world, and make a comfortable living out of sinners in this; and it was better than being a parson, for you could always preach at home instead of in a damp church, and had not to go out in all weathers and visit the sick.

And yet this religion jarred on her; it was chapel-bred, of course—such noise and fury would have been

incompatible with the orthodox church—and was it not rather a cowardly thing to pray and sing all day, beat the drum loudly, so to speak, then lie down at night cosily, feeling that Heaven is pacified, and that you have only to keep on at it, and make noise enough to walk straight into glory? How complacent! how prudent! how greedy! Not to thank God, trembling and thrilling, for deliverance from sharp temptation, for victory hard wrung from frail human flesh, but all this self-glorification for nothing and *from* nothing; and yet these people accomplish what the sage never has done, what the beautiful, the rich (the two great modern levers of the world), and the famous cannot, for they are absolutely and perfectly happy.

You could not get away from Spurgeon in that house, for he met and welcomed you in the hall, he presided over your roast mutton, overlooked the piano in the drawing-room, accompanied you to bed, stared you in the face when you awoke in the morning, lay in wait for you in the green-house and the kitchen, making irreverent Becky long to tell the old ladies the story about St. Peter and the great preacher that made all London smile. For when Spurgeon died, and there was affixed outside the Tabernacle a notice that he had entered into glory at a certain hour that day, there was found some hours later another telegram notice on the board that ran as follows:—

"Spurgeon not arrived; very anxious.—ST. PETER."

And continually Becky struggled with the fell tempta-

tion to shriek it out, and watch their faces as the gist of it came home to the elect.

Indeed the texts might almost have stuck on the walls by atmospheric pressure, for the very air was devout; Lavenders had been the Rectory for many years, till a rich rector had elected to build a new one on higher ground. Then a worthy couple came to dwell in the old place, who made welcome first one wanderer, then another, till there were many, and those who had tasted once of the peace and order of Lavenders, came, and came again, some to remain altogether. And now the old souls who had founded it lay side by side yonder in the "garden," and another had come to reign in their stead.

Becky presently went upstairs to her mother and paused, as she always did, when she reached the top stairs of the landing, and came flush with the wonderful bit that she saw directly before her through the low diamond-paned windows; it always made her think of one of Alfred East's poems in colour, yet it was only a pool, with the skeleton branches of a great horse-chestnut reflected in it, and at sunset the effect was magical, and made her heart ache for joy at its beauty.

"Only a man with a soul and a heart could paint it," she said to herself, as if it were some new thing, and then she went on to her mother's room, where the dear old lady was sitting up in bed, looking as pleased as a girl with her first love-letter, for that morning she had heard from Walter, a few lines posted on board the *Dunottar Castle*. A couple of letters from the

noble unemployed lay also on the coverlid, but did not count.

Mrs. Bethune leaned back on her snowy pillows, bright with the happiness that only her children could give her, and though she looked like a Madonna, with her silvery hair parted over the pure oval of her face, and with her blue eyes and beautiful complexion, she yet had not been the mother of twelve self-willed girls and boys without seeing a thing or two, and there was a tenacity and grit about her that made her take her own way very thoroughly, even among all the religious excitements of Lavenders.

The roomy old house, with its really fine airy bedrooms (rather spoilt by texts and almanacs), its big sitting-rooms with quaint outlooks, suited her very well, accustomed as she had been to having plenty of room to move about in. Town made her ill in a very short time, and she was always glad to get back, and in the little village she was well known, and greatly respected, indeed there were few houses into which her beautiful needlework and help did not go; and a keen interest was taken in her sons and daughters, especially Becky, when they came to see her.

Her mother made a mental note that town did not suit Becky, for the girl's face was positively haggard as she took Walter's letter in her hand, and glanced first at the Family Bible, and the texts on the walls, then at the inlaid tea-caddy they had used at home, and lastly and wistfully at the big hand-glass on the table in which every one of the girls had studied her

profile and frock when going to her first ball. How young they had been then! How careless, how gay!

As she took in all the familiar details, a sudden horror seized, and shook her like a reed. What had she done, what had she become, since last she had been in this room? She was to know it often in the future, that terror of herself, as some strange, unknown thing. . . .

> "And still at an uncertain hour
> That agony returns,"

and the apathy of the past hours fell from her, and she knew herself for a coward, possessed only by a headlong impulse of flight from dreadful associations that she had feared to make indelible.

Well, she had always longed for it—the will that dared, the blow that slew, the life of action, if but for a few brief moments; and then she thought of David's arms, strong as steel about her, but did not blush. When elemental things come in, artificial ones vanish; in earthquake and shipwreck one may be naked, and know it not, which proves how radically false our so-called modesty is; but had she not revealed her secret? In the great crux of life, had she failed, and failed dishonourably?

It came and passed in a flash, and Mrs. Bethune seeing only the convulsive shiver, thought the girl was cold. Then Walter's school-boy handwriting unrolled itself to Becky's eyes, and she found herself reading aloud the undated letter.

"*Dunottar Castle.*

"My Glorious old Mother,—I hope this finds you in the best of health and spirits, as it leaves me at present. Give my love to Becky. So no more at present, my glorious old mother, from your loving son, Walter."

"Beautiful," said Becky, pulling herself together, and looking at her mother's shining face, at the dear old hand held out for the precious epistle. "How different to the letters of the noble unemployed;" but the missus frowned at this, it was an old grievance with her that the girls, who had all found men ready and willing to undertake them (even ungrateful and unresponsive Becky), were hard on the boys, who had to provide for themselves in the best way they could.

"I wonder who Walter's pal is," said Becky thoughtfully; "he is just the boy to throw the fortune into another man's lap, and walk off in his seven-leagued boots, without waiting for even a thank you. And that is all very well, but it isn't business;" and she thought incidentally of the small heap of bills that the past fortnight of hard extravagance would shortly pour into Jane Pomeroy's hand.

"Walter told me all about it," said the missus, who could keep a secret as well as anybody, "though he did not mention the man's name. It seems this person, whom he always calls his pal, was very kind to him once, and has money with which to run the concern, and Walter has none—he could not do it alone. It will cost a lot to dig out this guano."

Becky wrinkled her little delicate nose, and absently

murmured "Spell it Huano, in the orthography of the fifteenth century."

The Missus settled herself cosily down for the treat of a chat with her Benjamin. She had been used to hold court thus in her beautiful home with her boys and girls, who all raced up to see her as soon as breakfast below stairs, with the more or less irritable Governor, was over, and surely the last generation had the good breeding this present one does not know the meaning of.

Mrs. Bethune had just drifted into that quiet haven, when all her children, save the youngest, were out in the world, and no one had ever heard her speak of those days Becky remembered, when they were all brought up like young princes and princesses, and knew no more of the value of money than if it had been dross.

And now she drew Becky's attention to the fine white shawl over her shoulders, recently sent her from India by a daughter married to a soldier, and indeed there was not the smallest gift, or scrap of anything sent to her by her careless children, that she did not secretly treasure up in the loneliness and exile of her days.

And Becky's heart ached, as it always did, when it touched at all points the tragedy of their family life; how neglectful she had been, and all the while the dear old mother had been sewing at frilled pillow-cases for one, at shirts for another, at a tea tablecloth for a third, sewing into every stitch of her exquisite needlework the deep intense love for her children that was the silent religion of her life . . . and they had all been wrapped up in their own affairs . . . if God ever weeps, it must

be at the picture of the mothers who give so much, and who get so little in return from those they love.

"Mother," said Becky, resolute to talk, and not think, "did I tell you Walter's friend called? We saw him often."

And it occurred to her to wonder what would have happened if at breakfast she had yelled out, "I tried to kill a man the very night before I came to join this spotless company!"

"Ask him to come down!" said the Missus briskly, "he can put up at the Dragon—it will be a treat to see a man about the place."

Her blue eyes sparkled, a lovely colour came into her cheeks. Becky involuntarily thought of how one of her mother's admirers had carried her (in a pink frock) over a puddle as they walked home after a ball, and thought that the hand-glass over there had never reflected any daughter so pretty as her mother must once have been.

"I'll write to him at once," said Mrs. Bethune, with animation, "and we will have long talks about Walter—and I will show him the entries in the Bible."

"But mother," said Becky, "he may not be able. He is engaged you know to Jane Pomeroy's niece by marriage, Féo Surrenden."

"What a heathenish name," said the Missus contemptuously; "I think I saw her once—a tipentail sort of girl," for all the swans outside Mrs. Bethune's own hearth circle were geese.

"She is very pretty," said Becky bravely, then anchored herself to a text on the wall before her, and felt that it gave her a sort of comfort.

"There is the ugliest woman stopping here I ever saw in my life," said Mrs. Bethune, with lively interest, "did you see her at breakfast?"

"Mammy dear, we can't all be lovely like you," said Becky, "and it's too cruel the way you sit there like a Sphinx and say nothing, only make me sit up with your sharp remedies," she added ruefully.

"Well," said Mrs. Bethune, with great decision, "I think a houseful of women without a man in it *detestable*."

"When are the twins expected?" inquired Becky; "have there been any Revivalist services lately; or are any coming on? Shall I ever forget how enjoyingly those boys raced up and down the passages, fetching more chairs for the converted, and singing—

'Oh! to be ripe and *ready!*'

"There's something very stimulating about religion set to dance music, mammy!"

Mrs. Bethune glanced round uneasily at the texts; she could not quite explain to Becky how long familiarity with them had in time bred respect.

"They only come in the summer," said the Missus; "but a most respectable man was here last week—a minister of some sort—a different one comes now to preach every Sunday, and he puts up here. It makes quite a change."

"I hope," said Becky, "that he won't be like the last one I saw, who got a distinct rise out of me. We got on splendidly, and I quite forgot that they are all temperance people here but you and I, and offered some of my bitter ale, then somehow we got on the subject of beauty,

and I asked him if he didn't think it was a joy to all beholders. Suddenly I remembered all those plain, waiting faces looking on, and knew I had put my foot into it, so when he said, 'My dear young lady, I never see a good-looking young woman without *pitying* her for the temptations to which she will be exposed,' I simply collapsed, and went under the table."

"You are talking nonsense," said the Missus, "and I must get up"—and no one would have dreamed from her manner that Becky was the apple of her eye.

So Becky went off on an excursion of her own, not half as miserable as she had expected to be, for in a house where nothing happens but what God wills, the doctrine of free will counts for less than nothing. Come David, come Billy, come Kelmersdale and Co., they would all be entrapped in the texts and remorseless mechanism of the thing, and sent harmless and converted back to town.

Becky peeped into the kitchen, where the spiritual and imperial head of affairs was turning a machine for potting meat as dexterously as she handled souls, and announced that she was going for a walk. A pile of delicate-cakes ready for baking stood on the table, and from the various preparations afloat Becky foretold a tea of scrumptious attractions for the Young Women's Christian Association meeting that afternoon—a very sweet tooth indeed has religion.

Then she stepped forth into the soft, out-of-season air, and straight into the arms of Lord Kelmersdale, who looked as if he had never worn anything but a blue serge suit, and striped shirt, and a bowler hat in his life.

CHAPTER XVI

"When you fall into a man's conversation the thing you should first consider is, whether he has a greater inclination to hear you, or that you should hear him."

BECKY frowned, and looked at him from top to toe as if she had been his unpaid tailor, and he had come to her to be measured for new clothes; then it occurred to her that he had brought news, and the very promptitude and audacity with which he had followed her here, almost commanded her respect.

He took her hand, looking past her at the text on the wall that set forth how an unseen auditor waited on every word uttered within those walls, and for the moment he could not reconcile texts and Becky Bethune, and was almost confounded.

"Hadn't we better go out?" he said hastily, and they moved away side by side, while the meat-machine went clicking on; it stopped no more than religion did, because idle men about town called at unholy hours of the morning on unregenerate young women in the country.

Becky walked on wires beside Kelmersdale, tense, expectant, and trying to keep herself in hand as they passed through the gate, and skirted the duck-pond. He was really a special edition printed for her own eye only, yet she feared to read it, while he, on his part, seemed

in no haste to produce his news, good or bad, which marked him as uncommon.

"I am staying at the Dragon," he said, and by that token she knew he had arrived overnight, and with more interest than she had hitherto displayed, glanced curiously up at him. His skin might be sallow, his crows' feet unmistakable, but his figure was good, and there was an undefinable charm about him, a subtle mastery of life, as of a man who had seen and done everything from the only point of view that really mattered, and decidedly he was more interesting than Billy, who had disappointed her deeply. For when we lock tragedy in a cupboard, and sally out to see a farce, only to find our pet droll has forgotten all his tricks, wherewith shall we be comforted, or how forgive him?

"And how did you get my address?" she inquired, impatient to know if she ran a good chance of appearing in appropriate costume in Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors.

"From Mrs. Pomeroy,"—and Becky said to herself viciously, that she owed Jane one for that—how could she tell that, following on a sleepless night in which the poor woman ranged the house, she had utterly collapsed after Becky's departure, as much at sea without Mr. Quekett, as that swearing, fighting, drinking, tender-hearted animal Tommy Atkins is, once the iron band of discipline fails him?

Becky, looking at him shrewdly, suspected that Jane had kept her own counsel about the attack on David, and what had followed, and indeed the plain truth was, that

Jane thought far more of Martha's death, and Quekett's fall, than any adventures the young people had gone through that night, and the principle of "what the eye don't view, the heart don't rue," held good in hers as in most instances.

Yet Kelmersdale looked preoccupied as he walked beside her towards the village green, with its cottages sentineled by grand old elm-trees like lords-in-waiting, and crowned at its top by schools, out of which presently the boys and girls would rush to play, the whole scene irresistibly recalling Miss Mitford's "Our Village."

"I went to Hill Street yesterday morning, and might not have got in, but met Carrington on the doorstep," said Kelmersdale. "I understood that there had been some trouble with servants. The butler had disappeared. His wife—" he paused.

"My God!" cried Becky, stopping short, "she is not dead?" She thought of Walter . . . of how many evenings he had spent below stairs in Martha's parlour; she seemed to distinctly hear his honest voice roaring out—

"Then car—*ry* me back to *old* Ten-nes-see!"

and a sense of sickness overcame her.

"I was afraid you might see it in the papers," he said, "and as I was coming down to stay at a house in this neighbourhood"—he named it, and might have added that he was also following a very old rule of his as regards women—"I decided on calling."

"She was murdered?" said Becky, and put up her hand to her throat.

"Yes—something of that kind. There is to be a coroner's inquest, and Mrs. Pomeroy was very glad for you to be out of it all; in fact she told me she had hurried you off that you might not know."

"Hurried her off!" When all Becky's longing had been to escape, and that had made her selfish and blind to Jane's trouble.

He saw that she was unnerved, and he went on talking to give her time to recover herself.

"Brutes servants are!" he said reflectively. "One of them had upset at least a quart of ink over that delightful Aubusson carpet in the drawing-room, and ruined it!" ("How clever of Jane!" thought Becky, with a gasp.) And David Moray—" He paused, but Becky gave no sign—"could not be of any use. He was wired for to Shotterbourne this morning; his father is very ill. He is always ill when he wants to get anything out of anybody."

"And if he would only die," said Becky fervently, if unsteadily, "it would be the very best thing he could do."

This was so like the town Becky, unframed in texts, that Hew Kelmersdale laughed, and took off his hat to let the sweet, unseasonable air blow over his forehead. It wanted exactly a fortnight to Christmas, and the weather was mild as summer.

"His father is only putting the screw on," he said. "He has got wind that Moray is going back to Africa—a last visit before settling down. And the old man wants that marriage to come off first."

"And so it ought," said Becky, "and I hope it will."

"It is commonly said of David Moray," said Kelsmersdale carelessly, "that he will walk a hundred miles to see a horse, or stalk big game, but turn round in the street to avoid speaking to a woman, and that there is not one born who will keep him from Africa."

The man was too well-bred to look at her as he said it; he knew he had but one rival, and that was David.

"And a horse is so much more interesting, and affords so much better sport," she said; "to my mind, too," she added, with some of her old recklessness, "his points are finer."

They had passed the schools from which came the unwilling hum of learners, and now approached the Garden of Death, for the churchyard down below had overflowed, and the new-comers had to themselves a high and sunny spot divided from the playground by a low hedge, so that Youth's laughter made sweet echoes all about their beds.

"That is where mother and I mean to lie some day," said Becky.

"You will live and die here?" he said incredulously, glancing down at the nestling village, its peaceful smoke-wreaths rising to the sky, then at the girl's face, that appealed to him in its pallor even more than when vivid with life and expression as in town. For she was unhappy, in one of her bottomless pits of despair, and it is in these moods that the most difficult women are the most easily won.

"Yes; why not? Down yonder," she pointed to Lavenders, half hidden in its belt of trees. "Mother and I have made our home. We drifted there, as others have

drifted, though we are not all derelicts; but we do not count among life's successes."

He shook his head in dissent as he regarded her.

"But we even up when we die," she added more briskly, "though it is a depressing thought, that in the race between you and the man you want to beat, it isn't the one who does the most brilliant things, but the one who lives longest that wins. '*Your* turn, I think,' says the winner, and bows you into oblivion, and either defiles your memory, or raises a flattering headstone over your grave, just as he thinks fit."

Kelmersdale looked at her keenly; he had followed the girl because she had bewitched him, and if he had discovered her among doubtful people, it would not have hindered his admiration in the least; but to find her brought up on the Bible, and expounding theories of death by a churchyard, was a revelation to him.

"*I* believe in dying sharp," she went on, "like Nelson, Gordon, Shelley, Byron—to be *mourned*—not forgotten. I want no nurses, no sick-room, no losing of my own identity, and being at the mercy of others, but at the will of God only, my Master, to whom I must perforce submit. Oh! don't you think that is what we cling to, no matter what we suffer, to be conscious *masters* of ourselves, that is why we shrink from madness even more than death, because we are quietly pushed on one side—our leave is asked in nothing, and we bitterly resent the interference?"

She was looking away over the headstones, and seemed to have forgotten Kelmersdale; and indeed, though she

came here often, it was a very unusual thing to have company, as her own real love for churchyards and their associations seemed peculiar to herself.

And Kelmersdale waited patiently; the finished man of the world is never astonished at anything a woman says or does, he only wonders she does not do more.

"Folks abuse Emily Brontë for dying on her feet," she went on. "I admire her for it; and when I'm dying, I hope some one will wheel me out into the open air. . . . '*There's the wind on the heath, brother,*' said Borrow's gipsy when asked if he would care to go on living in sickness and blindness; 'if I could only feel that, I would gladly live for ever.'"

"Yes," said Kelmersdale gravely, "that is, after all, the strongest argument against immortality, that we are glum when we lie a-dying—that instinctively we feel this is our one throw, our *one* chance; should we not feel very differently if we knew this life was but the antechamber to something that would really satisfy us? So, for one Christian who dies confident, for one supported by the padded crutches of Roman Catholic rites, a thousand die wretched. It is partly, perhaps, that in the rush of modern life we feel we have not had our fling—have not eaten our cake; that our years of ignorance and waste of life's raw material should be shorter, our years of intelligent enjoyment infinitely longer."

Involuntarily Becky looked up at him, soothed. This man fell in with her moods, understood her extravagant fancies, and he had come to bridge over a bad time, when her thoughts were scourges, and she herself almost "fey."

"I suppose," she said, "one could hardly bear one's own life—so insignificant and poor a thing is it—if it were not illuminated by the great lives, the beautiful ones in the world, from which we can choose and glorify our own with them, if we so desire. Each has been but one life, as yours or mine—it has passed and gone, fretting its owner, perhaps, as ours frets us; but it has left us a priceless legacy, touched our hearts and imaginations, toughened our will, and helped us to fight out our little battles to a not inglorious end."

"But," she added, "we do not find these lives in society. Society always shows to me, as the magnificent ritual of High Mass does to the Christian, the essence of religion is wanting. Better far, a village church with rude voices, rude devotion, but with a definite intention towards a definite belief, than such empty, soulless murmuring. You are not a Roman Catholic?" she added quickly.

"No. If I sin, I sin with my eyes wide open—because I choose to do it—not because I put the blame on human nature, and am washed clean by absolution."

"I'm so glad. What religion *I* have I will never part with, and to 'vert is to be dead to one's friends. Do you help the poor much?" she said a little shyly.

"My steward—" he said, and paused, and her face changed and clouded.

"I have no money," she said, "or I would live the highest, fullest life of all—the life of Philanthropy. It is a selfish life, perhaps—they say that, humanly speaking, we never find an absolutely pure motive—but if it

gives *us* pleasure, it gives more to others, and there are so few things we can enjoy without hurting somebody else. But to go down into the dungeons of the starving and oppressed, to drive the darkness out, and take the sunshine in—Oh, how glorious! for I am a great believer in passing on every scrap of anything good we can to our fellow-humans."

"Help me to do it," said Kelmersdale quietly; "if that is the life that you really wish to live, come to me, and take it."

But she had turned her head away, and affected not to hear.

In the whirlpool of town, where each person seeks apparently to save time by producing on all beholders an instantaneous photograph of himself in colours vivid as some screaming poster on a hoarding, she had been *risqué*, careless, and diligent only to hide all that was good in her; but here, where she knew she would not be misunderstood, she could afford to be her real self, and he found the new Becky infinitely more charming than the old. Keen of bodily senses as of intellectual, quick of doubt as of belief, she appealed to him in more ways than one, and he swore to himself that it should go hard with him if he did not take her out of this death-in-life existence yet.

"Would you believe," she said, waving her hand in a circle, as if to sweep away one subject and designate another, "that this quiet green was once black with the mob that marched down, forty thousand strong, to revenge Wat Tyler's death? The son of the lord of the

manor here caused the robber's head to be cut off in London, so the mob promptly retaliated by cutting off the *father's* head, which was rather one-sided justice, don't you think? But the son got a peerage, and flourished greatly, and was the founder of one of our greatest ducal houses."

But Kelmersdale was not interested in Wat Tyler, or vicarious justice, he was thinking what existence to one of her ardent spirit this old-world spot must be. It seems the rule of modern life that we are healthy and unhappy in the country, and happy and unhealthy in town.

"Are you never dull here?" he said.

"Oh!" she cried, with a little shiver, "there are grey days, hideous days, when one can't get out, and I look at the pool and long to drown myself in it."

"It is enough to make you morbid," he exclaimed, "to sit by a green pond, and think of miserable things. Life can never be entirely happy, I admit, because if you give every soul on earth what he wants—even do away with the poor—death and pain remain, our two great enemies; but meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile," she said, laughing, "we have our distractions! Last year"—she pointed to the lower part of the green—"the Twins came in a caravan and encamped there, and we had a merry time."

"The Twins?" he said, with knitted brows of non-comprehension.

"In the summer," she said, "they go about catching souls during the day, and feed their bodies at the souls'

expense, and at night sleep in the caravan. It is very clean, and placarded all over with texts. They are quite young, and have luscious noses, and mouths, and eyes; their voices are in fine order, also their appetites, which are amazing. They are so cock-sure of themselves that you could fancy they would romp cheerfully into heaven and slap Peter on the back, and say, 'Shall we kneel down, and say a few words of prayer before we go in?' That is what they said to the rector here once, and he, dear good man, kneeled down in his own study, and let them. *I* would have—" She paused.

"Kicked them," said Kelmersdale.

"Yes. They held services at Lavenders that lasted a week, and there was a debauch of devotion, and the cold puddings got colder, and every one got up early, and the house was crammed with villagers being prayed over. The barrel-organ that each of us keeps in his brain grinds out strange tunes at times, and mine never by any chance fits the occasion, anything but hymns rose to my lips."

She chattered on. In the relaxing of the over-strained bow she would have talked to her worst enemy rather than be silent that morning.

"What is their denomination?" said Kelmersdale, smiling.

"How should I know? I only know one religion; it's in my duty to my neighbour. You can't go wrong if you stick to *that*."

Kelmersdale looked down at her, and his expression told her what was her duty to him.

"I used to catch their eyes when they were praying,

and they would stop dead. They took my silence for conversion at first, but I long for them to come again!" she added, nodding.

"But they come in summer. Do you mean to be always here in summer?"

"Not always, but it is the spring here that I love."

And indeed, it was always the growing, not the fixed that enchanted Becky—the hope, not the fulfilment; and sometimes she thought with terror that if there *were* a hereafter, and her place in it inevitably fixed, she would not be able to run away from it, however she might try.

She had forgotten Kelmersdale, she was alone, and inclining her ear to Nature, and trying to write down the whispers that reached her. It occurred to him then that in her extraordinary sensibility she might possibly be an artist first and a woman after.

"And so"—she came to herself with a start—"when spring comes, I am at the end of a string that pulls and pulls at me! Mother Nature calls her child, and the child must come; and if I am with Jane Pomeroy, I escape to Bushey Park, where I walk for hours and am happy. In the hot summer weather I kick my shoes off and walk under the blossoming limes, over by the great golden buttercup meadow, and no one sees.

She stopped abruptly, realising how dangerous the power of silence and listening in a man may be. She had often heard of Kelmersdale's wonderful charm with women, and scouted it; in town he had been to her but a weary man of burnt-out fires, who longed to warm him-

self by her vitality, and now she was talking to him with the frankness and spontaneity of a child.

But in his mind, or taste, or heart, or all three, there was a something that made a woman let herself go with Hew, and bring out her inmost thoughts and fancies, certain of being neither misunderstood, nor taken advantage of; few indeed are the men to be so trusted, and the very rarity of them makes them but the more loved and appreciated.

And then, looking up quickly, she saw not the sallow, refined man of fifty, his face a fine network of the lines wrought by experience and finesse, but another man, strong as a young god, with his youth warm in him . . . this one might manage, but he would never beat her . . . and as she looked away, wincing, Kelmersdale understood.

By the side of the "Garden" was a stile, and without waiting for his hand she mounted, and was over it, with a flash of slim ankles, and if his own joints creaked as he followed on, he made no sign. She said to herself as he joined her, that it would not surprise her to find at the next stile Billy, and on the one beyond that Quekett—intellectual of face, deferential of manner, with his false air of Pinero, adapting himself with equal grace to the position of a butler, a murderer, or a bishop.

Life had spun round at such a rate with her during the past few weeks that nothing astonished her now, and it still raced on; she was not even womanly enough to weep for poor Martha, or worry about Jane, and to walk with Kelmersdale across stubble whence now and then

came a poignant whiff of ground convolvulus, seemed to her the most natural thing in the world, and the most comforting. But then Nature always halves trouble, if we could but go direct to her with it, only instead we prefer to lean on our fellow-humans, and like ninepins we mostly fall down, all in a row.

"You are going to take me for a walk," he said, "and that will be delightful. I am not due at Highclere until the afternoon."

"There is some fine shooting at Highclere," she said, as they took the muddy footpath across the field.

He assented, and waited for her to go on, he was like David in this, that he never forced conversation, did not drag yesterday, to-morrow, and the day after, into to-day's affairs, but left himself entirely in the hands of the woman he happened to be with.

"I am glad you came," she said eagerly. "I had the blues, and now they are partly gone. They are so good, down there," and she turned in the path, and pointed to Lavenders. "How lovely it must be, instead of *crawling* in agony round your bed until the small hours of the morning, thinking of your sins, to feel you have shuffled them all off on to some one else, and been forgiven, and can rest in peace!"

"It is hypnotic suggestion," he said, "there is much more of it in the world than you think. But why should your sins keep you awake?"

And in his mind he substituted the word "love" for "sins."

Something had happened between her and David

Moray on the night of the Savoy dinner; he himself had been at a table near, and seen her departure, and David, too, was absent, and then she had fled precipitately the following morning, but not on account of the murder of Martha Quekett, which had been kept from her.

"It is my digestion, I suppose," said Becky, "but I always think that a person who can sin all day, and sleep sound all night, is beyond earthly retribution of any kind; what conscience, otherwise indigestion, cannot reach, assuredly no one else can."

Dejection had swooped down on her again, it was a grey and colourless landscape at which she looked, and she suddenly realised that she had been badly frightened, and had, for the time being, entirely lost her pluck. What if David should follow and catch her, when her trembling hand could no longer wield weapon against him?

"I ought to go back," she said restlessly. "I would not have left had I known about poor Martha Quekett."

"And Mrs. Pomeroy particularly wishes you away," said Kelmersdale, alarmed at the threatened downfall of his plans, "besides, your mother must be delighted to have you with her."

"Yes, dear mother," said Becky. "You must see her—she *loves* the men, you know."

"And you do not," he said quietly.

"The woman who does not love men in the plural often loves one in the singular very much indeed," said Becky with spirit; "take Féo Surrenden, for instance. *No* man could ever be worthy of such devotion as hers."

"No," said Kelmersdale, "no. You can't put a quart into a pint cup, and David Moray's heart would barely hold a pint of love, I should say, for anybody. Love has never come into his scheme of life. He loves adventure, and the last place in which he would think of looking for it is in a lady's bower. I have known him for many years, and when women make *beaux yeux* at him, he simply does not see them. I should say he would have to go through a severe training before he *did* know what love meant, and resent such training deeply. Fortunately, he'll never get it from Féo Surrenden."

"I think," said Becky, "that it is only the ugly woman who is really loved; with a pretty one, man is so confused by the envelope that he never even opens it to see the message, the inner writing of her heart."

Kelmersdale shook his head.

"Plain women may get most of the prizes of life," he said, "but they don't get all the flowers and music as well. And Miss Surrenden could not live without either."

Personally he did not admire Féo. He valued distinction above all things in a woman, and he thought she would enjoy life, but without ecstasy, while Becky's eyes and lips, her rich dark hair with red lights in it, were danger-signals of the most perilous temperament on earth.

"Féo is a brick," cried Becky warmly, "most girls' hearts nowadays are like those foreign fowls, they *look* all right, but when you cut them no juice runs out—they have been frozen, and are not the real thing—but Féo's heart is real, and I love her. And if she be happy,

what matters? *She* will love him—*he* will love sport—he may stalk, and with coursing blood run to earth his quarry many times a week, but how can you expect him to keep up the same excitement about a woman he has stalked once, and is forced to keep beside him, *tame* for the rest of his days?"

"Some women could never be tamed," said Kelmersdale, looking at the exquisite colour that had come into her face (it is indeed the Judgment Day for a woman when her complexion reflects the megrims of her heart), "and afford the best sport in the whole world. The men who can drive thoroughbreds, who are prodigal with kind words while handling a mettlesome creature, and who do not resort to the whip, are the men who can handle high-spirited women to the best advantage, and may wisely become their husbands."

"And so few men have the patience and skill to drive them," said Becky; "and what they call snap in a girl is temper in a wife. *Temper!* that a woman must not show—that *she* feels to be spirit, the very fine flame and soul of her."

They had come to a stile, and Becky sat down on the top rung of it. There was no hurry; there was nothing to do at Lavenders, even if she had not been afraid to go back, and sit down to her ghastly thoughts. Naturally courageous, she seized each hour as it came and threw herself eagerly into the distraction of the moment. To have a real good talk with an unexpectedly sympathetic person was one of the few things that had always made her say life was worth living.

"I think," said Becky, apparently *à propos de bottes*, "that the one sex was invented to be the curse of the other, and that it is quite easy to do without love altogether. When women have cut men clean out of their lives they are bright and happy—as men are without women," she added a little bitterly, thinking of David's angry, unwilling lapse into passion.

Kelmersdale knew that a woman is never further from being in love with a man than when she discusses with him. If we could see the *chef* making the *plat* that delights us should we rejoice in it? But he could wait; every year would bring her nearer to him, and he was not old, as men go, yet.

He did not in the least mind her loving David, as he felt pretty sure she did, though she honourably respected Féo's rights. A woman who has once opened the door of her heart to let love pass in, may give an aftermath of affection to a second comer that lasts longer, and is just as valuable.

"A woman must love," he said; "to yield makes her womanly, but to fight—fight always—against all natural instincts unsexes her; she breaks her heart, arrests her mental and moral growth and development by doing it. She deteriorates, and is neither a useful woman nor a useful man—the mischief must come out somewhere. And one day she will find, by little cruelties and unkindnesses she shows to others, that the inner flow of her womanliness is gone. I do not speak of all women, but of many."

Becky mused awhile. The life resistant, the playing of

a fighting game must always thrill the pulses, be more interesting to the born combatant than the merging of self in the sensuous tide of expediency, so that one is neither aware of, nor wishes to call out, the reserves of his character.

Suddenly she cried out, for she had a real woman in her mind, "That is true. Sometimes Nature sings as loud in a woman's heart as in a man's; she may crush it down, stifle it, but it is there."

Hew Kelmersdale looked up at her suddenly; like David Moray, he wondered why her quarrel with life was so bitter.

"You have taken sides very early," he said, "and yet," he added gently, "the trick of knowing better than a man, and laughing at him, is like a cancer, or other evil thing, and apt to grow incurable."

"Yes," said Becky slowly; "I am afraid I know you very well. I see man with his antics, his heroism, his smallness, and his magnanimity, moving as in a glass before me, and he is own brother to myself, and I am often a sister to be ashamed of. Still, we beat you in one thing—and perhaps it is the only one—unselfishness. A man will not go out of his way to do anything he does not choose, unless it happens to stand like a lion in his path, and he cannot get past, or edge round it."

"And so you have studied us," said Kelmersdale, "and not to our advantage, and men have studied you to more. And let me tell you that, in the long run, it is the man who studies you most who will make you happiest—mental sympathy wears best in marriage—with women like you.

You love to talk, to pour out the gold of your mind; you will not be happy with some one who will not listen to you. One day you will find that you *must* talk, and if your husband will not understand, you will be very unhappy."

Yes; Becky thought that was true. Were love and sympathy always to be irreconcilable enemies?

Suddenly she asked him if he would like to hear a little story that gave her views of marriage in a nutshell? There was devilment in her eye as she looked up at him, and he liked her thus, and eagerly begged to be told.

"Well, a costermonger's wife died, and he missed her from his barrow, and thought he would like to know how she was getting on, so went to a spiritualist, and requested that his 'Arriett should be called up.

"'Are you there, 'Arriett?'

"'Yus.'

"'Ow are yer?'

"'*I'm* all raight.'

"'Are you 'appy, 'Arriett?'

"'Oh! wery 'appy indeed!'

"'Appier than yer was with me.'

"'Oh! *much* 'appier."

"'And where are yer, 'Arriett?'

"'In 'ell!'"

A burst of laughter followed 'Arriett's preference for a hot region over the joys of matrimony, and then Becky said—

"Were I a man I would never marry, but wander all

my days. Do not the Easterns say that 'travel is riches'?"

He shook his head.

"It is not what you see, but the company in which you see it that makes things delightful," he said. "And travel is for older people, not girls like you. You have the only real wealth on earth—the golden quality of youth—and you do not know it, all the rhythm, the colour, the intoxication of it! Say to yourself every day and every hour, 'I am young—young—young,' and be as happy as you can, for we can only be very happy when we are young. Some day you will not be able to suffer and enjoy as you do now, but you would gladly have all the old fierce pain over again to bring youth back," he added with a smile that held much sadness. "I don't think any of us realise the enormous value of Time—probably none of those people over there did," and he glanced towards the distant headstones.

"Yes," said Becky; "people will haggle over a bargain or a guinea, but they will part wholesale with great slices of time. We are not taught as children the sense of proportion. It is no more trouble to learn to do big things than small ones, as it is just as easy to have right friends as the wrong ones. And to do good with your great wealth," she added gently, "would after a while come just as easy to you as your aimless life about town."

He smiled, unaffronted, and indeed he had a marvellous gentleness and suavity of manner that never struck you as a manner till you compared other men's with it, and

marked their failure; and after all, people with good manners make life wonderfully smooth to those about them, and it is so much more easy and agreeable to discuss their wrong ways with them when you know that they will neither be rude themselves, nor allow you to be rude either!

He made her feel that she would be thoroughly well taken care of by him, indeed it seemed to Becky that even if she saw men coming to arrest her for the attempted murder of the Indian, he would get her out of the difficulty without an effort, and a sense of safety ran warmly through her.

"I am glad you are going to be at Highclere!" she cried out suddenly, "I am very glad!" and then she jumped off the stile and announced that she must go home, her roast mutton would be waiting.

Just then there came a shout, and a rush of feet, and all the pent-up boys and girls shot out of the schools, and spread themselves in games over the green. The landscape was no longer chill and grey, with that riot of young life to flood it, but Hew Kelmersdale did not feel old as he piloted Becky through the shouting crowd, for he knew that he had come leagues nearer to her that morning than he had done in all their meetings in town. And surely he had brought her nerve back, and a little of her colour, when he unwillingly left her on the doorstep of Lavenders.

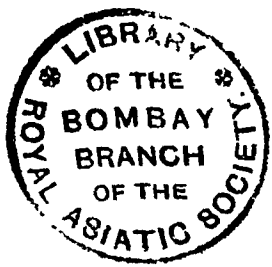
"I won't ask you to come in," she said, "for there are at least twelve old and middle-aged ladies ("I love old ladies," he murmured), and you would have to talk to them all—and you might catch cold while we are saying grace

before early dinner. Who is that man?" and she nodded towards a vision of unobtrusive elegance in the village street, who crossed their line of vision, and disappeared into the inn.

"Only my man," said Hew, while the "only" was viciously assuring himself that if this sort of thing was going on, and he to be buried in Suffolk wilds, while Kelmersdale Towers was all ready for their reception, he should give a month's notice, and positively refuse on any consideration whatever to furnish his master with a character when he left.

"Good-bye," said Kelmersdale, accepting his dismissal gracefully, as the door opened, and the texts claimed her. "I hope you will allow me to bring my cousin over to pay her respects to you and your mother, for we shall be neighbours now for some weeks."

Then he bent his head over her hand in a way that pleased her, it is so seldom that a man knows how to kiss a hand properly. Billy put too much heart into the ceremony, and David, with excellent intentions, altogether lacked that practice which is supposed to make perfect even the smallest act.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CHAPTER XVII

"Better be a worm and feed on the mulberries of Daphne,
Than a King's guest."

"DEAREST," wrote Féo, "I was amazed to find you flown, and David was very angry; he said you might have told him you were going—but how could you think of anything else when you were saving his life? Darling, I am ashamed to say, I was jealous and miserable! He forbade mother to say a word about it, and she promised. The Indian only had a scratch or two, he said, and had got clean off, and the less said about it the better. But I think a lot of it, you dear, brave Becky. Aunt Jane is heart-broken about poor Martha, you know—but said she could not bear for you to be in the midst of it all—so had hustled you off early, though it seems you had arranged to steal away yesterday without a good-bye to any one. David has been sent for to his father, and if he persists in going to Africa, I shall die.—With fondest love, ever your own, DOGGIE.

"Billy is awfully good, and helping Aunt Jane a lot. We are all to keep it dark about the Indian, he says."

This was the note Becky found waiting when she got in, and it sent up her spirits with a bound, keeping her mother's forefinger busy all dinner-time, trying to restrain the exuberance of her conversation. But if

she began by shocking she set up at last a broad ripple of smiles round the table, and presently sat at needlework with her mother, feeling that she would never, never crawl round her little bed as a penitent again.

But presently she sobered down, and told the tragedy of the Queketts, leaving out her own share in recent events, and the missus was shocked, but all her life she had strictly minded her own business, keeping her sympathies for her family, and not diffusing them over an ungrateful world. Perhaps she bore in mind the Japanese proverb that bids us keep our own doorsteps clean, and not try to sweep our neighbour's roofs, and she reverted presently to matters nearer home, notably to Kelmersdale, who would have been a refreshing change from the insipidity of female life at Lavenders.

"He is coming over soon, mother," said Becky, and the missus sniffed. Becky never reposed confidence in her about her admirers, but in Mrs. Bethune's young day, girls did not show a predilection for the company of men old enough to be their fathers. She most particularly wanted to see David Moray, and found Becky tiresome and unenthusiastic about him; still she was used to disappointments, and took this one quietly and unselfishly, as was her way.

Jane Pomeroy's handwriting was shaky, and the flurry of her mind reflected itself visibly in the letters received by Becky next morning, but the gist of it was just what the girl had expected. The detectives called in had speedily found out that the woman servants in the house knew that some one was concealed in the Quekett

quarters, for they had overheard him talking broken English to Quekett, but it was not their affair, and they knew better than to make any complaints to their mistress.

One of them remembered a dark-skinned man in common English clothes coming down the area one afternoon, and being afterwards closeted with Quekett in his room, and the latter appeared to have bet and gambled more than ever after this visit, and to spend a great deal of money, and it was about a week after this that one of the women got a severe fright on the staircase. She saw what she described as a "black man," standing on the threshold of one of the drawing-room doors, while David Moray was in the adjoining room, but as she approached, he vanished, and after that she and the other woman always fancied some one was stealing about the place, and they got scared and declared that a ghost "walked." It was noticed that Mrs. Quekett was greatly worried, and high words were overheard between her and Quekett, though she was a very quiet woman. Three days before the night Jane Pomeroy gave her dinner party, Quekett announced that his wife was ill and he was nursing her himself. Whether she was killed by the Indian or Quekett at that time was not known, but, threatening interference with their plans, she had been removed.

The jeweller had been found to whom Quekett had sold uncut diamonds of considerable size and value, and it was pretty certain that when he and the Indian made their escape, they took more with them. Had their

scheme succeeded, David would probably have been murdered, and his body somehow disposed of, and as no one but themselves knew he had come to the house, no one would ever have thought of looking for him there. Signs of the Indian's occupation of a room close to the Queketts had been discovered, but though he wore next to no clothing when he escaped, no trace had yet been found of either of them.

All this in rambling style did poor Jane set forth, and finished by reminding Becky of what she had always said about the cellars. She thought it very wonderful that Becky should have had that instinct of danger, and arrived at Hill Street just in time to be of use to David Moray, but no one knew about that, the police had only taken in hand the murder of Mrs. Quekett, and Jane concluded by begging the girl not to come back, as she herself was going to one of her husband's relations in the country, as soon as all the details following on the dreadful business were arranged.

Then Becky sat down to wait, knowing that David would walk in the moment he got free of his selfish parent, though what he would say, or what *she* would, was quite beyond her power of imagining.

As it chanced, Kelmersdale came first, driving tandem with Cora Leveson, and he found Becky's mother, with the lace lappel on her grey hair, and a quiet black gown on her still shapely figure, an even greater surprise than Becky's environment of texts.

To think that Becky, the little rip, the daring wit of a supper table, whose devilry had always made her go one

better than anybody else, the girl whose startling *chic* suggested a sketch by Jan Van Beers, had sprung from this modest woman, who had never said, or done, or thought, a risqué thing in her life! Fascinating contrast, and what an earnest for his wife's sound principles, no matter how erratic her future conduct might be!

Cora, on the other hand, thought Hew had excellent taste, and rattled on easily as she sat in the abbreviated tweed costume she had worn when shooting with the men that morning, and yet had the serene air of being "born," that dressed in rags or in cloth of gold, the true aristocrat never loses.

A sportswoman is never petty, and she begged Becky to come over, and help her entertain half-a-dozen stupid men who walked about all day, and snored all the evening.

"I do it myself, sometimes," she added with an indescribable wink. But Becky did not promise—what would David say when he found she had left—and to be in the company of Kelmersdale?

They fell upon scandal presently; as a woman both Mrs. Leveson and Becky knew, had recently tried for a divorce, and only succeeded in getting a judicial separation.

"Revenge on a man," said Cora, "is like a boomerang, that whichever way you throw it, comes back and hits you violently on the head. What *he* does also recoils inevitably on her—but it never affects himself."

Becky glanced at her mother, and hastily changed the conversation. She, and Walter, and David were all of

one mind in some respects, and Becky had lately begun to wonder whether she might not in time come to their way of thinking too.

"She won't make half such a pretty old woman as her mother, but she has no end of snap," said Cora, as, turning out of the gate, they nearly knocked a man down who was coming in, but it was too dark to see who it might be. They raced home through the December darkness, and on the way she fell to discussing the texts that had formed Becky's background, and which must surely blush for her fifty times a day.

"Real biz, Hew?" she said to him carelessly.

"Very real," he said, and she shrugged her shoulders, and thought she would not give much for his chance. Money he could give Becky in plenty—for what it was worth—and it would bring nothing really worth having, nor health, nor love, nor immunity from dishonour, death, disease, or heart betrayal. And rank, too, he could bestow on her, but Becky's eyes mocked at wealth and position, she was as easy receiving him there, in a glorified almshouse, as if she had been the greatest heiress in the three kingdoms.

David, for he it was whom Kelmersdale had nearly knocked down, coming out of the darkness into the blinking light of texts that in no way suggested to him Becky's presence, blurted out—

"So Kelmersdale is here," when he found himself in the room with her.

"Yes. How do you do? Mother, this is David Moray, whom you wished so much to see," and David was fairly

caught, and had to talk Walter till he went near to gnashing his teeth openly.

But when the missus went away to fetch the Family Bible, and show him Walter's biography as inscribed therein, David flew to Becky, and seizing her hands cried—

"How dared you run off like that?"

"I hope your father is better," she said coldly, "and that your wedding-day is fixed. For of course you will take Féo with you to Africa, you can leave her safely in a town when you go long distances after big game."

He turned away with a choked exclamation, there was not a trace in this rosy girl of the white-faced woman who had struck hard for his life, struck and spared not, whose lips had stammered and shaken even while they formed words of insult to drive him from her.

The missus came back with the great book in her hands, and he sat down with her at the table in the circle of lamplight, and neither heard, nor saw, nor knew anything, but that behind him, over there by the fire, the only woman who had ever taught him love (first comradeship, then admiration, then hatred, lastly love), was laughing at him, having lost no time in amusing herself with Kelmersdale in his own enforced absence.

Mrs. Bethune had a proper idea of the value of all men, but she delighted in young ones, and David was welcome as flowers in May, and presently, looking at the dear old face, with the pink glow that had come into it, he thought of his own mother, and gladdened her heart with tales of Walter's prowess.

And so, while Becky sewed, the old, old glorification of the boy was gone over, which, could he but have heard, would have caused him a wonderful shame and astonishment; for if he ever thought of himself, which was seldom, it was only to wonder how such a hulking brute ever came to be brother to such sisters, being indeed but the degenerate scion of a good old stock. Proudly the old mother narrated how during the Basuto War, when the two columns met who were fighting the same enemy, one camp boastfully put forward, as the champion fighter of Africa, a giant who stood six feet four inches high, and backed him against any man in the other camp, to which Walter instantly responded, though his adjutant interfered, saying it was not a fair fight, the difference in the two men's heights and size being so great. But Walter, backed by the whole feeling of his camp (one can imagine the excitement ran high), insisted, and a day was fixed to fight it out before the two camps. Would that a Conan Doyle had been there to describe that fight! But leaving all details to be filled in by the imagination, Mrs. Bethune could only baldly relate that the encounter lasted three whole days, the belligerents merely pausing for food, and that on the second day, Walter's right arm being broken, he refused to stop fighting, and on the third day achieved a glorious victory over the enemy that transferred the champion's laurels to his own brow.

David thought it awfully plucky of Walter, but his voice sounded flat, and he was so obviously out of sorts that even the missus noticed it, nevertheless, she read him an entry in the Bible of the occasion when Captain Witboy

captured Walter, and, thinking him a German spy, had him led out, and tied to a tree, and ordered him to be shot, when one of the Hottentots, who adored him, rushed forward and told who he was; but Walter made no plea for mercy, he merely said, "You have only the Germans against you now; if you kill me, you'll have to fight the English," and they had let him go, and he and Captain Witboy, so nearly his executioner, had become the greatest of friends from that day.

As they talked at the table, various shapes in women's clothes had stolen in, and sat working at this and that in the distance, but the missus did not even turn her head, and gradually those bundles of clothes, with human hearts within, drew closer, and looked admiringly at that close cropped, sunny head bent over the Bible, and Becky's heart throbbed, for not one of them but had cast an appraising look at Kelmersdale, and then looked away.

The mistress of the house came in, and sat down beside them, too sure of herself to even understand class distinctions, and indeed, thoroughgoing religion, reducing us all to worms, places each one of us on terms of perfect equality in the dust.

"You will stay to supper?" she said, and David would stay to supper, he would stay till Eternity, in fact, till he had got that word out of Becky he had come to get, but he had reckoned without prayers, the harmonium in that pleasant drawing-room had suggested nothing, and then the missus shut her beloved book, and they all went in to supper.

The table was pretty and picturesque, the flowers, the

deep red colour of the gory fruit puddings helped to hypnotise one with the suggestion that at half-past eight it was eminently right to eat potted meat, cold beef, and cheese.

Becky violently restrained herself from being very kind to David, and passing him things. In French divorce cases it is laid down as one of the rules, that the opposing parties shall not sit at table together, or they may become friends as they press on to each other the pepper, the vegetables, or the wine! But David took care of himself,—indeed, his appetite quite astonished and rather affronted her, and he gave close attention to her mother, who enjoyed herself thoroughly, choosing to think the unattended female ranks opposite envious, instead of interested, as they really were.

Becky thought of the last time she and David had sat at table together, of the eager eyes of the men as they rested on her, eagerness only brought there by something that pleases them, and which is half beauty-worship, and half desire. A great ambassador had said that night to her, "I thought I had seen ze best that was to be seen in London—but I find ze best is you—why haf I not met you before?" She ate her potted meat with moderate appetite, and presently they went through the connecting door to the drawing-room, and soon the servants came in —pretty girls whose lovely complexions pointed to happy hearts, and lovers in the background.

Two apple-cheeked, old village school mistresses were there, whose one joy was music, as the one dissipation of their lives was an evening at Lavenders. Content with

the laborious round of their days, they were handed by David to their seats, the one at the piano, the other at the harmonium, and the sound as of droning bagpipes immediately filled the air.

How much better bred he was than she, thought Becky, how entirely at ease he had been in his unusual surroundings, and it startled her when his voice joined in with the rest as they sang—

> "The Prince is ever in them,
> The daylight is serene." . . .

How could she tell that he was contrasting the peace of this bright, wide room, pure and full of music, with the misery of the preceding evening, spent in discussing absolutely hateful subjects with his father?

Something rolled over the poor boy's heart—for he was but little more—that feeling of tears that comes to the brave and true when the flogged spirit can no further go, though the ill-used flesh refuses to cry out.

Becky, stealing a covert glance at him, saw only that he felt no inclination to laugh—he was not so much out of tune with all this as she supposed . . . a primitive life, and untrodden forests strips a man of shams, but confirms in him the worship of God . . . how much more worldly and out of touch with truth *she* was . . . is it because a man sometimes deplores the loss of it in himself, that he demands the hold fast of reverence in woman?

When they had done singing, and that night there were none of the chirrupy, lirrupy, Salvation Army tunes that seem to set sacred things to twinkling feet, David

read the chapter for the day, and Becky sat looking at him, his behaviour giving a new reading of his character.

At Lavenders she had always shocked her mother, indeed, she had rather taken pride in it; now she saw herself hard, common. David had already spotted that blot in her in town. She was not really feminine, or true, or a genuine woman like Féo or her mother, who had one passion—her children—and followed at that fold.

For all her crushing wealth and elaboration of frocks Féo was also a true woman—but David could not see it. Men have imagination as well as women, and hold on to their belief ever more stubbornly, and common as Becky might be, he preferred *her*. And then she abruptly changed sides, religion or no religion, he was falser now to his love with the brown dog's eyes, than when he had lingered and lingered, to tell his traveller's tales with herself to encourage him. He was false through and through.

How could a man so disloyal have real religion? But Becky, like others, made the mistake of thinking man is woven all of one piece and one colour; he is really a bit of shot silk, and whichever way you turn him, reveals new and iridescent combinations.

And now the lesson was over, and Becky gasped as David was asked to say "a few words," as no minister was present.

David had never yet shrunk from anything that required personal pluck (except in matters of love, there he was out of his depth, and floundered), but now, as without waiting

for an answer, all the women sank on their knees, and he found himself standing in the centre of an amphitheatre of prostrate backs of unassorted sizes, monarch of all he surveyed, he yet might have preached a short sermon of the Church militant type, had not Becky, looking at him over her shoulder, with a glance poignantly wicked, knocked him clean out, so that without stopping to think, he rushed instantly into the only prayer he ever used—

"Our Father which art in Heaven" . . . he looked like the angel Gabriel, Becky thought, with his fair, bowed head; she had proved her power over him, and was sorry. As she burrowed her face into the chair-bottom, she fought her tears, so that when they all stood up, she looked composed as the rest.

In the long drawn confusion of near a dozen women wishing each other good-night, he gained her side and whispered, "I must have a word with you now."

"Impossible," she said; "to-morrow, by the pool, at ten," and at the thought of the long night, and the morning cruel, glaring, in which to lead a forlorn hope, his heart failed him, and he went near to hating her, for pain of body he had known often, but pain of heart hitherto never.

Mrs. Bethune lifted her face as she said good-night to her boy's friend, and David stooped down and kissed her. Then, though so angry with her, behind her mother's back he snatched Becky's hand, and like the blackguard that he was—but a careful blackguard, for he managed to suppress the sound as by a gently-popping cork—kissed it passionately, then departed.

One of the women present saw it, and went with throbbing heart up the wide shallow stairs; she was not too old to have forgotten, and for her, too, the sun had once shone, the world had been made new over again.

And Becky tossed and flung about the long winter's night, and crawled round more miles of bed for her love's sake than for her sins, only she was quite determined that she would not compound the two, and so perpetrate a felony.

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CHAPTER XVIII

"How shall the harper's hand
Repair its cunning, and the sweet old harp
Be modulated as of old? Methinks
'Twere time to break and cast it in the fire;
The vain old harp. . . ."

BECKY stood looking out of the window, defiantly humming under her breath,

"A southerly wind and a cloudy sky
Proclaim it a hunting mo-or-ning!"

but instead of going a fox-hunting, David was coming to hunt *her*.

She had put on an extremely smart blue cloth gown that matched the colour of her eyes exactly, and conscience was trouncing her soundly, and asking why, in Féo's interests, she had not selected the oldest and most unbecoming frock in her wardrobe?

She glanced around, there were women, women everywhere; went into the drawing-room, more women; tried the parlour, which was empty, save for a cat, the Bishop of his tribe, who had evidently been fighting during the night. Usually the most sleek, beautiful, dignified creature, he now, with one eye half-closed, a torn ear, disabled leg, and a coat all hung about with bits of straw and stuff, displayed a shame and sorrow for himself that was almost *human* in its intensity.

"If only I could take your photo, sir," said Becky, "and write underneath it, 'A night out!'" But she spoke comfortably to him, and fetched milk, for here was something almost as wretched as herself; indeed the wounds to his self-esteem were even greater than her own, she thought, as she snatched up a cloak from the hall, and went out bareheaded into the dull morning, and through the garden towards the walk overarched by leafless boughs, that ran by the side of the pool. Becky always declared that by its mere beauty it beckoned her ceaselessly to come and drown herself in it, an invitation she stoutly resisted, however gloomy the outlook might be, for suicide was absolutely impossible to such fighting blood as hers, and that of all her family. They altered in nothing, but were just themselves in poverty as in wealth, their sturdy strain of character untouched, uncommingled from generation to generation, but rather growing richer in pluck and in stamina, down to their descendants to-day.

Becky's ancestors had been hard riding, hard living Dorsetshire squires, who kept fox-hounds, and observed the Ten Commandments, or went out and broke them, as they thought fit, like gentlemen; but there could be no question as to the high courage of her race. And she wanted it all, as she realised that a dozen years hence, she might be walking here still, for that it was David Moray whom she loved, and David Moray alone whom she would ever take willingly as mate.

To this had she come, after all her light indifference to love, after the hearts she had wrung, the lives she had

crossed, the scorn she had felt and preached for what men call love.

She stood looking for a while into the reflected boughs in the water, then sat down on a felled trunk that had been there so long that it was covered with a hundred minute growths; it had seen her grow from a slip of a maiden to a thoughtful woman, and in time, perhaps, would see her a very weary old one. How often here she had weighed the merits of first one, then another, of her endless lovers —and the very last time she sat here, of Billy, in some respects, the least wearying of the lot.

Glancing about her, she missed the hammock that in summer always hung between two trees near by. One day a godly young woman fell out of it, and bruised herself severely, but would use no remedies, "she would leave it to the Lord," she said.

Becky smiled at the recollection, and looked up to see David coming quickly towards her, and his grace, his sunny head, smote her always as a fresh surprise and delight, yet she waved her hand as negligently as if he had come to pay a mere morning call, not to decide a question that involved the happiness of three lives.

As she stood up, her cloak fell back, and showed her in all that bravery of blue, and with a sudden exclamation, he held her at arm's length to look at her. But her eyes, set in curly black lashes, and the exact colour of a river forget-me-not, flatly denied the coquetry of her gown, and she wrapped her cloak closely about her as they sat down side by side on the log. There was only the side

of the house, hooded with ivy, turned towards them, and the pool would tell no tales.

"Tell me about Hill Street," she said. "How awfully clever of Jane Pomeroy to hide all that mess with ink."

"I did that," he said absently, for he was intent on other things. "I went back after taking Féo and her mother home—but you didn't come down."

"No, I didn't come down. Is anything known, except to ourselves, of what I did?"

"Nothing. Quekett is wanted for the murder of his wife, but I think the Indian did it. They couldn't make her an accomplice—so they got rid of her, and they are not likely to be caught now."

"And Jane Pomeroy?"

He started.

"Oh! she's all right," he said vaguely, "Carrington's looking after her. Becky," and he turned to her suddenly, "are you going to marry that brute Kelmersdale?"

"Why not?"

"A man with a face like a citron——"

"And such perfect manners that you don't even notice them—it is only by comparing other men's with his that you realise the charm and good breeding of them."

"A regular old woman," said David viciously.

"He wouldn't *beat* a woman if you mean that—" began Becky, but David's eyes were dangerous, and stopped her.

"And pray, can't a poor man come and shoot for a few days with his cousin, if he so pleases?"

"There must have been a private understanding between you," said David in hard tones, "or he would not have dared to turn up at Lavenders. You certainly did not lose much time."

"No," said Becky, "one of my mottoes is—'Hit hard and hit quickly.' Now if I had stopped to think when—when ——"

"Would you have done as much for Kelmersdale?" he cried, softening, "or for Billy? Nicely you've treated Billy!" he added, with a virtuous air that tickled Becky immensely.

"That's the worst of a man who has to grin for favours," she said, sighing, "if he doesn't grin enough, he gets left. But I really am awfully fond of Billy—he has been behaving like a Trojan lately."

"He told me he was coming down here soon, and I hope he'll put Kelmersdale in the duck pond," said David with great energy. "If Carrington drowns him, before you spoil your life by marrying him—so much the better."

"Why shouldn't he, after all?" said Becky meditatively, "I expect nothing whatever of life or love, and he wouldn't bore me or expect sentiment, and rot of that kind. Now Billy *might*."

"You seem to do the trick," cried David savagely, "by never caring a hang about men—that's why they care so much about you."

Becky smoothed a delicate black eyebrow reflectively, and turning suddenly to look at her, it struck David (though he had always hated kissing, and thought it immensely

overrated), that the most temptingly lovely bit of a really pretty girl's face commences at the middle of her nose, and ends in the tip of her chin, and David's lips were perilously near that tit-bit just then. But she knew men too well not to have an antidote ready, so said sharply—

"You have given me no message from Féo yet."

"For God's sake," he cried irritably, "let us leave Féo out—I've come to see *you*, not to talk about her."

"Did you fix the date of your wedding when you saw your father?" said Becky, in the voice of his commanding officer to a deserter.

"No."

"But he sent for you to ask you to do so?"

"Yes."

Becky snatched a glance at him. He looked worried and ill, he had not acclimatised himself yet to being in love, and it upset him thoroughly. Really it was most unfortunate, he would have to go through such a lot of training first . . . he was just a selfish male, lock, stock, and barrel, yet he was able to bring a light into Becky's eyes that no mere unselfish adorer ever could.

She had never deceived herself about David—probably with him the current would never be established between the brain and the passions, and she knew only too well his limitations; but he was very bright, he was strong, and she was too intensely feminine herself not to adore strength; he was clean, he had not an ounce of vice in him, and if in middle age he would only want a good pal to ride with him to hounds, she must be content

to read a dull book of evenings while he snored; still, she might have been very happy with him, but for Féo.

She had always believed herself incapable of an all sacrificing great passion; she might love a man very deeply, but a little something would always remain out of his reach, something that was the inner core of her, that was, and *must* be her own. Or was it an instinctive wincing from man's ingratitude and desertion—her profound recognition of his unfaithfulness, that made her at once too mistrustful and too proud, to put herself entirely at his mercy?

"I'm not cut out for a lover," he said abruptly, as if his thoughts had been on all fours with hers. "I know what I want, and I try to get it—but I can't finick round; I know the colour of your eyes and gown, but not how your gowns are made, as Billy does. And I love you, Becky, and you know it."

"More shame to you," said Becky warmly, and got up as if she found his neighbourhood intolerable.

"Why did you sit on my knee the other night?" he demanded, getting up also, and facing her.

"I would have sat on a chimpanzee's—anything alive and *warm*," she said. "Do you think it is an everyday occurrence with a girl to kill a man?"

"Yet, you *would* have killed him—not for Billy or for Kelmersdale—but for me," he said triumphantly.

"Walter would have done the same; you forget we are brother and sister, '*Fortiter et celeriter*' is written under our crest—and we must act up to it, you know!"

"And you ran away. Why did you run away?"

"The day had been fixed for ever so long; I always come to mother a fortnight before Christmas."

"Becky, would you marry me if I were free?"

"No!"

"Why?"

Becky drew a sharp breath, said to herself, "Now or never!" and then glanced him over with an air of thoughtful disparagement.

"Not my style," she said, and shook her head. "For one thing, I should like a less concentrated essence of sport."

"And you professed to care for nothing else," he cried, in a rage.

"*Autres temps, autres mœurs*," she said, and shrugged her shoulders carelessly.

"It's because I am poor, and Kelmersdale is rich," said David, his face bleak with pain and anger.

"It's because—Oh! how dare you!" she cried, in a sudden blaze of scorn, "how dare you come here to me and talk of love, when you have nothing to offer? I never steal other women's lovers, David Moray, and you are a coward and a traitor to Féo, to say what you have said to me, not once, but twice."

"My God!" he cried, "at least I have been true to *you*."

"You have been true to what you wanted," she said cruelly. "Do you realise what a bitter disappointment you have been to me, all through? You had not the pluck to tell me that you were engaged to Féo—and now,

have you had the manliness to tell Féo you wish to jilt her for me? Poor Féo—dear Féo—with her dog's eyes of devotion—they are always before me—" and Becky's voice changed, and she turned abruptly away.

Indeed she had need to keep those eyes before her, for David's face frightened her; he was graduating in the school of love with alarming rapidity, and he had a way of being thorough in all he did.

"She does not know—she has no reason yet to be disappointed in you," went on Becky, "and you may thank God for it, and try and be—all that she believes you to be."

David had thrown himself down on the tree trunk, and sat with bent head, staring at nothing. He had never thought to have said to him such words as Becky had said by any one living.

"Be a man," cried Becky urgently; "we all have, more or less, to pay for our parents' mistakes, and even if your father is not worth it, you promised—and, as a man of honour, you must pay."

"When I think of him," began David bitterly, and stopped. "I *did* think of him last night," he said, getting up and standing before her, "there, in the midst of all those good people; you were laughing, I know, but *I* felt no inclination to laugh. The contrast between this life, and his—or rather the dregs of his—the snarling, selfish viciousness of the man—but he always hated sport, and a sportsman gives his son at least a chance, or his enemy either, for the matter of that."

"You owe *him* nothing," flashed out Becky, "but Féo

—everything. You will take her with you to Africa?" she added abruptly.

He groaned, and turned away. Then he came back, and laying his hands on her shoulders, said—

"Did you ever care in the least for me, Becky?"

"As a good pal—yes."

"As a lover?"

"No."

"Are you going to marry Kelmersdale?"

"Yes."

She uttered the lie without flinching; she looked, at that moment, the hard Becky that he had latterly known in town, then his hands fell, and he said savagely,

"I'll marry her to-morrow, if she doesn't mind a registrar's office, and we'll go to Africa—or the devil, next day."

"And Féo will be charming company for either place," said Becky. "If she hadn't committed the mistake of being in love with you, you would be mad about her. But don't take her to a registrar's, it's low, and Cleopatterer would die outright; go with the New Year, and good luck be with you."

"Look up Walter—and his Tolly," she added briskly, "and get Féo to write and tell me all about it. Fancy Féo and Tolly face to face," she tried to laugh, but checked the discordant sound abruptly, or it must have given her away; "but Féo's breeding is equal to anything —that is the advantage of birth."

"And what will you do?" he said, looking about him with a visible shudder. All about was decaying and

rotten life, the air heavy with the last stagnant breath of the old year, and if nature is beautiful when she is beginning to fade, so is she not in her last stages of decay; it is only when frost and snow have wrapped her in white cere-cloths, and made her body firm and snowy white, that we can look upon her with our usual sense of enjoyment.

"I shall stay here with mother, for the present," said Becky, a vivid study in blues and whites, the whites being her face, hands, and linen-collar and cuffs, and the blues her eyes, and delicious blue gown.

"With 'Auld Robin Gray' to comfort you," he said, in a tone of disgust. Once more to him she was the brilliant town Becky, the heartless jade who had kicked out Billy for Kelmersdale, who was neither capable of loving himself nor any other man.

"Cleopatterer will miss Féo," she said suddenly. "It —it will take a little while, you know—the—the settlements and things."

"If she doesn't marry me next week, I'll go to Africa without her," said David grimly. "And you needn't trouble to come up for my hanging."

"Thanks awfully, I'd rather go to a first-class funeral any day, than a wedding—the food's better. David—you'll be kind to the poor little girl, won't you?"

"You are making me do the unkindest thing to her in the whole world—to marry her."

"No, no. She *trusted* us—both you and me."

He looked from her pleading face to the pool, and shivered as if he were cold.

"Now that's all settled," he said, "come and sit down

here, for we've got to say good-bye," and he led her to the log and placed himself beside her, holding her hand fast.

"We have been good pals," he said slowly, "real comrades in spite of hasty words, and we suit each other, though lately you have made it your business to pretend we don't. And I love you—and I shall love you a lot more before I have done, remember that, and wherever I am, and whatever woman I am with, I shall wish it were you, and I shall hate her because she is not you. But now, and before we part, I would like you to take back those words of yours about my not coming to you in my right name. At first it was thoughtlessness, not caddishness—but afterwards, though I did not know it, it was because I had fallen in love with you at first sight, and dreaded any interference in our companionship."

He paused. Becky had bent her head, and turned it so far aside from him, that he could only see the coils of her dark red-tipped hair, and a bit of one white cheek. She was fighting an insane longing to turn into the shelter of his arms, and rest there for one little space of time; to be no longer a shivering unhappy soul, suffering in cruel loneliness, but set within the magic circle ringed round with love that holds but two persons, and whose name is Heaven . . . for this was love.

How she would have hated to be wedged into that narrow seat by any other man . . . somehow David's body never intruded itself between you and his rare personality, did not discount his character as some men's do. It was all bone, muscle, sinew that enveloped heart

and spirit, without any grossness of flesh, and Becky felt that she might surrender herself to him without stint and without shame.

And she would sit here alone by this pool and, ah God! long how passionately for this hour when he had been beside her, and only honour kept their beating hearts asunder . . . but she must hold up to the end . . . if he knew that she loved him, that would be the end of everything.

"Yes," she said steadily, "you were not a cad; it was just thoughtlessness." But still she averted her face. "We have been awfully good pals, and if you see Walter you must be sure and tell him so."

She half sprang up, and thanked God too soon for a terrible moment safely passed, but he had no intention of taking as farewell the passive hand, the face averted, instead, he wrapped his arms round her as in a vice, and kissed her. Rapid as the movement was, her mouth made itself hard as iron against her clenched teeth, resolute to repel, to deny, and man-like, he thought that even the softness of her lips had looked a lie . . . there was far too much trouble in love, too little pleasure in it, according to David's estimation.

He let her go instantly; he had no desire to hold her now. From a man's selfish point of view, what a girl would not take she did not want, and kissing, or not kissing him, was less a question of moral courage than of inclination. Yet as they moved together towards the house, instinct told him that she had cheated him again. It must always be a torment to him now which was the

real Becky—the one he had unconsciously fallen in love with at the beginning, or the other who was making a great marriage without love . . . nor would he ever know now if she had ever so little loved himself.

When the side door was reached, (and the smell from the apple-room close by haunted his nostrils ever after when he thought of the scene), Becky slipped away without one backward glance. She simply dared not trust herself to speak, nor did David make any attempt to stay her, or bid her farewell.

The train that took him away half-an-hour later passed close at the back of Lavenders, and from a corner of her window she saw him lean out, and look eagerly up at the grey old house. Then he was gone, and Féo's happiness, or what she regarded as happiness, assured.

Kelmersdale had served his turn. Probably but for his following her to Lavenders, and thus giving a colour to her life, David would not have been prevailed upon to leave her.

Then Becky kneeled down by her bed, not knowing how she had been able to send him away . . . and yet, when our ordeal comes, everything in our lives has insensibly led up to that special moment of temptation, and prepared us for it. The opportunity occurs, but the greatest battles are often won before they are fought, and it is our past that at the crucial moment controls us, when our passions, like giants, would rise up and slay us.

Yet would Becky not have had her empty heart back again for a king's ransom. They had loved one another

—unwisely, no doubt, but very truly—and nothing could undo that fact; nothing in heaven or earth could alter that . . . come what might, at least she had had love.

There are tens of thousands who have never seen that light, never warmed themselves by it . . . who will have to grope on in darkness to the cheerless end.

CHAPTER XIX

"A man to yield his life, but never a purpose or a point; a man born in armour, and assailable only through his loves."

Féo and David were married on the last day of the old year, and started for Africa next morning. Cleopatterer was so upset by the immodest quietness of the proceedings, that within twenty-four hours of the marriage she accepted a man who had long admired her, and who, being really clever, and from every point of view desirable, had a theory that a first-class fool for a wife, who has also money and good looks, is the finest sedative or hop-pillow going.

The house in Hill Street was shut up, and Jane Pomeroy, at the Lessinghams' country house, was trying to get the right focus of her future life, occasionally remarking that the behest not to put your trust in princes was clearly a misprint, and "servants" intended. Whereat Lady Lessingham remarked, that if it were bad with them, it was decidedly worse without them.

So Becky had a clear three months at Lavenders, and Kelmersdale got ample time to lay siege to her ambition, if not her heart. Billy, too, ran down from time to time, so that the Dragon began to think that Miss Becky was well supplied with lovers, and that she was hard to please

if she could not, out of the three who had come in such hot haste after her, pick one to suit her.

David was first favourite, naturally; and his marriage, which was regarded as one of pique, came as a severe shock to the old ladies, who vividly remembered his visit. Mrs. Bethune lamented that she would have no further opportunities of preaching the gospel according to St. Walter, but consoled herself by writing long letters to the Pioneer; indeed her postage stamps, addressed to children in all the four corners of the earth, and the post-office orders despatched weekly to the noble unemployed, took up the greater part of her income, and most of her time.

And every day Becky realised more keenly, how, like many others, in hot youth she had undervalued a mother's love. She had always known it to be there; indeed, when David had so bitterly disappointed her, she had felt a great longing to come to Lavenders.

She had said to herself, "I want to go to my dear old mother, and hold her hand, and feel, 'Here is the one creature who has loved me *perfectly*—the only one who ever will.' For a man will love you, yes, in a man's way, but not like a mother—there is only that one way."

Féo had written, wild with joy, just before her marriage, and her pathetic certainty of happiness with David had brought smarting tears to Becky's eyes. A sudden terror lest she had condemned this devoted creature to a prison life, with a callous-hearted gaoler, sometimes seized her, and yet Becky knew that like the dog which will rather lie on the bare ground with its master, than live in comfort

with what it does not love, Féo had chosen the better part, and given her character the one chance of unselfishness and elevation that had ever come into her life.

As well as any Whitechapel donah, Féo knew that love is the only thing really worth living for; that in her own set, luxuries of all kinds were the embroideries of existence, not the life itself—the froth of the wine, but not the wine below; and David was the only thing out of a waste of superfluities she had ever coveted for her own. That lean, strong, African face was more to her, and dearer from old association, she thought, than it could possibly be to any other . . . but that is ever a woman's way—the thing she happens to want is the life itself to her; to others who may desire it, merely a plaything.

Billy had been one of the few persons present at the wedding, and then only because Jane Pomeroy professed herself too severely shaken to go unsupported to the church. Talking it over afterwards, with open minds, as they drove home, and not attempting to deceive each other as to the fact of David's love for Becky, Billy said—

"He went through with it as a man does who walks straight up to the enemy's guns, hoping that the first shot may kill him."

And Jane Pomeroy had burst into tears as she thought of Féo's rapt face, as she stood beside David. The real tragedy of marriage comes home to a woman as it never does to a man, else why does she so often weep passionately at a wedding?

Perhaps she agrees with Hipponax, who says that "the

two pleasantest days of a woman are her marriage day and the day of her funeral." The one when she hopes to be happy—the other when she hopes no more; but there is one other, and that is the best—the day when she is a mother.

Billy had dropped his eye-glass, and looked grimly out of the window, for he had had a bad quarter of an hour with Becky at Lavenders, and she had made him understand that not he, nor Kelmersdale, nor any one else had the smallest chance with her—that there never *could* be anybody so long as she lived; but she had put him on his honour not to tell David this, and the latter left England believing that she would shortly become Hew Kelmersdale's wife.

And Hew believed it, too.

He by no means despaired of her, now David was out of the way. If she had refused him once, that was no reason why she should do so twice. The dear old mother was failing, and when Becky was quite alone in the world she might turn to him, for the excellent Billy was out of the question, and Becky had snubbed all the new men in the country whom she had met at the Levesons', and who came after her.

But though really attached to Billy, she preferred Kelmersdale for company. He never attempted to talk love, only tried to hobble her with the bonds of real mental sympathy. His mind, too, was a dazzling exhibition, rather than a museum, to which she freely resorted whenever she wanted amusement, or to improve her knowledge of men, women, and things.

It was a hopelessly wet winter, and the heavy roads made cycling impossible, and walking a weariness of the flesh. She had never breathed freely between four walls; movement was always a delight to her; the stiffest wind could not beat her back, nor the wildest weather keep her within doors when the mood came upon her to wander. After hours of excessive walking she would feel the blood coursing in her veins, her wretched habit of analysis slip from her, and be just a good animal . . . and Providence, with its eternal bludgeon, would slip out of sight. But now the sludge and the grey skies beat down her spirits, and a hopeless depression grew on her.

Kelmersdale drove over often to fetch her when at Highclere, and sometimes she would not go, but occasionally she did not disdain to take the ribbons, and sit beside him. Indeed his conversation and presence made the only spot of brightness in her existence, for she did not find Cora Leveson interesting—a woman who never opens a book, or looks at a newspaper, seldom is.

To be a happy, healthy animal, is a fine thing, according to Lombroso, who maintains that all persons who write great books, paint great pictures, or signally distinguish themselves in any particular line, are lopsided of brain, and either drunkards or criminals. Is it not, however, rather hard to label thus the men and women who have left a deathless legacy of beauty to the world, purchased at the cost of *their* toil and agony?

It is good to be sane, and one can never be mad if one has not a mind to go out of; but Becky sometimes

shrewdly suspected herself of being partly lopsided, or she could not suffer and enjoy with the intensity she did, and make so many mistakes.

She had felt all the disappointments a woman of originally noble aims and ideals must meet with in life, as the sordidness and unloveliness of modern times *must* weigh on an enthusiastic spirit that thirsts for the heroism, and poetry, and romance of other and purer days.

She knew that she did not improve as she grew older. The veil betwixt her and what she beheld grew less transparent; and the rapture of the mornings, the splendour of the sunsets, gave her less heartache, and more joy, just as her efforts to live up to her better self became less strenuous, if not less sincere.

"Keep your ideals," Jane had more than once said to her, "but never idealise man," and that was precisely what she was doing now with David, only she did not know it.

Are they not very vital to us, those ideals, deep nourished in almost every human heart whence conduct springs, for what we wish to become, what we wish to know, and to attain to, and to conquer, all these spring from the ideality with which we clothe life, and make it beautiful.

But the curse that seemed to lie on all her family only angered, did not soften her. And where were they now, that bright band of sisters, all so much older than she, that only one of them had been in part her companion?

By north, by south, by east, by west the bones of her brothers and sisters lay, and the one she dared

think of least was that passionately loved little Annie, who lay in the great and beautiful Chinese cemetery with rich store of flowers to cover her. Willingly she had closed her exquisite blue eyes early on life and its disappointments, and as time went by, Becky knew that it was well with her.

"'When the spring-time comes, gentle Annie,
When the wild flower is springing on the lea!'"

whispered Becky with a sob in her throat.

And Death had knocked lately at her mother's door; he would knock again, and perchance not then be denied.

She still came downstairs, and sat at her little table by the fireplace, but had no need to lean forward to admonish Becky, now—the girl was altogether quieter, took no pleasure in bewildering holy men, or shocking the true believers who sat around, and the irresponsibility that often marks extraordinarily high spirits had deserted her. In hours of pain and solitude, Dorfling's words in Nordau's "Malady of the Century" would recur to her:—

"Every soul perceives clearly that it is a part of an eternal whole; it feels unhappy and uneasy in a fragmentary existence, and yearns to go back again to the whole from whence it came. Individual life means removal from that all-embracing whole; individual death is the complete union of finite parts with the infinite whole. Thus, although life is a necessity, it is a continual pain and ceaseless yearning. Death is the freedom from pain, and the fulfilment of that yearning. The only aim of life is death at the end of it, and

death is the goal towards which every activity of the living organism eagerly strives."

Sometimes (and at the back of the Final Cause's head, for all its cruel ways, if we only knew it, there is a reason) Becky would ask herself if it might not be that the Unknown, keen to use every scrap of the best, was using even *her*, disciplining her stormy spirit with pain to some useful end?

After days and nights of incessant thought, ever going round and round in a circle, some glimmering of the selfishness, the inutility of striving, clamouring human passion would dawn on her mind (and this most often at night), of how all that we think and dream of is of *ourselves*, how turning ever inwards must make us selfish and monotonous, but that what we give out passes into the world in ever widening waves of blessedness and light.

Something seemed to say to her—

> "Drink thou the wine of dying to self,
> From thyself set thyself free,"

and apart from her own heartache, she was feeling with her mother, trying to go step for step with the dear old feet along that narrow road that has room for only one—when there is room and to spare in the path, the children's steps stray wilfully from it . . . they go out into the world, they forget, they leave the mother to eat her heart out alone, when a message, a letter, a trifling gift would stay its hunger . . . they will never understand till they hang quivering over their first-born, perchance called upon to lose it.

Becky remembered now, how more than once, towards morning, she had wakened to see her mother looking ghost-like in at the door . . . poor loving mother, going back to her lonely bed, with the memory of her warm ring of boys and girls; and now she was alone, her home made among strangers. . . . Oh! the reticence, the boundlessness, the unutterable loyalty of a mother's love! The sudden realisation of it frightened Becky—what was her worthless life, what were her paltry ambitions beside the strength of such love as *this?* Walter, David, her mother, were all teaching her lessons . . . and her mother's was best of all. . . .

One night, with uncertain steps, and leaning on her woman's arm, the old mother came stealing to Becky's bedside fearing her throat was in pain, as indeed it was, after hours of walking on wet grass by the pool; and when she had gone, Becky found herself weeping hopelessly, because she could never bring her love up to full measure now, not if her mother lived for ever and ever, for the children will always measure theirs with pipkins, and the mother's love is the ungrudging, inexhaustible sea.

CHAPTER XX

"Lucretius sat down to contemplate the mechanical Drama of the Universe which he was part actor in; himself and all about him (as in his own sublime description of the Roman Theatre) discoloured with the lurid reflex of the curtain suspended between the spectator and the scene."

WALTER wrote from Cape Town that an expert was going with him up to Cape Cross, to verify his estimate of the guano; and as a matter of fact it turned out that far more than the two hundred thousand tons he had calculated were found there.

And then there was an interval after the expert's cable home—and it was understood that Walter was taking little hundred-mile walks in the neighbourhood looking for water. Meanwhile, in England an expedition was being rapidly fitted out by his pal, who proved himself a man of energy and resource, and organised the settlement so admirably that afterwards the Germans in astonishment confessed that the English had made a bigger colony in three months than they had in ten years.

But it took months to get together the men, ships, stores, materials for building houses, and furniture to stock them, and all manner of implements, games, books, every known material with which to fight dulness in a self-centred community in a desert land. It would be June before all was ready for departure.

Meanwhile Féo's letters (the first arrived towards the end of February) ran on like a dancing brook of gladness: the hardships over there were *nil*, the expeditions on which David allowed her to accompany him—fenced round by precautions that would have ruined the fine flavour of danger to Becky—wildly exciting; she loved the climate, the people, the way men *did* things over there, instead of talking about them as at home, and David as a hunter, was a thousand times nicer, and better tempered than when killing time in drawing-rooms at home.

Becky twisted her face into a queer grimace at this part of the letter, and made some time-honoured reflections on the extreme bliss of ignorance, and the folly of wisdom. Féo said she had already come across Cissy Soltamore and another woman she knew, and they amused themselves very well in Cape Town, where the hotels provided them with most of the luxuries, if few of the real comforts of life, while their husbands were doing something especially dangerous, and preferred to leave them in safety behind.

She said David meant to look up Walter before long, but that the Pioneer was hard to catch, as he was always moving about, and he was then supposed to be up at the islands, killing seals as big as oxen and as small as sheep, with all the regularity of a properly wound up clock. Féo also spoke of the obstinate old farmer who ruled the Transvaal, and of a greater than he, who loomed, vast and terrible, overshadowing African earth and heaven, a colossal figure of insatiable ambition, but for his country, not himself—a man who, single-handed, and without cost-

ing the mother country one penny, has brought under the English flag a territory as large as France, Germany, and Austria put together.

Becky had all a woman's admiration for a genius, especially one of action, of energy, working always towards definite ends, and producing solid and ever-increasing results. Strength of intellect, and strength of will, appealed to her more forcibly than the abstract, the imaginative, and the philosophical, as it always must to intensely feminine women.

She envied David's wife for being in that rich, stirring country, long and picturesquely familiar to us through the Bible. Féo begged her to come out to them. Why not make it a honeymoon trip when she married Kelmersdale? They would have a real good time together, better even than when they were all in Hill Street! She warned Becky that she would find David very shabby, for he would not spend a penny on himself, and was quite vexed with her (Becky grinned at this definition of one of David's rages) because she did not like poor old Lord Shotterbourne to be hard up, and the Castle to fall into ruins.

She was very, very happy; such was the unceasing refrain of all she wrote. And yet, and yet, thought Becky, the happiest people are those who enjoy silently . . . it is so rare, so scarce, this happiness that they do not blab it out, they put their hands over it, and hide it . . . and David gave no sign, he sent no message, no portrait by which she might read his face, and judge if Féo made her own sunshine, or he hers.

When a man is deeply wounded, his hurts heal much

less quickly than those of a woman! Often while the woman is crying out, and shrieking at the fear of pain, the man quietly dies, saying no word, and it is much the same with affairs of the heart. Only Nature had helped; Nature, who while we are passionately crying out that we cannot go on with it, that we will try no more, is working without orders, just as our fingers unconsciously feel round the box we cannot open, or the bit of difficult work we vow we cannot do, and lo! suddenly the box is open, and the work done.

If a brave nature goes doggedly through with what it *has* to bear, one day the burden suddenly lightens, and the man is once more master of his own fate, and the woman, who has made hell for him, less than nothing.

But it must ever be a humiliating thought that we have grudged our pennies to one who has thrown down to us uncounted all his gold; and Becky had cheated David, and lied to him about Kelmersdale, and she feared the day when she and he should come face to face.

Yet had she not suffered too? Was she not even now like that man who, being rescued from the gallows after being partially hanged, declared that he lost all pain in an instant, and that his rescue had snatched him from a glorious light, whose charm baffled all description? Becky could not forget the light she once had seen . . . she cried out incessantly for it, as a child will for the cake that in a moment of passion it has thrust away.

But for one who gets his heart's desire, there are millions that fail. Nature and man's laws alike, work with prodigal waste, and are stone-blind to human breakages,

and after all, this tiny span of happiness seized, what is it?

"There is another life, hard, rough, and thorny, trodden with bleeding feet and aching brow, the life of which the cross is the symbol; a battle which no peace follows this side the grave, which the grave gapes to finish before the victory is won; and, strange that it should be so, this is the highest life of man. Look back along the great names of history, there is none whose life has been other than this."

Becky came across this extract one day in one of the solid books she had taken to studying, but she felt quite sure she would never be a great name in history, so might be as ignobly wretched as she pleased—and she was.

Her thoughts moved in cycles, like that inner circle of Regent's Park, where the same faces meet you with exasperating repetition, till at last you rush from the place to escape them; and her heart failed her as she looked ahead, for Jane seemed to have cast in her lot with her husband's relations, and seldom wrote, and then very coldly, to the girl who so sincerely loved her, and felt the alienation deeply.

Becky's strong nature sometimes recoiled from the monotony of life at Lavenders, and each time that Kelmersdale went away and returned, it seemed to him that she was a little paler and sadder, and therefore nearer to falling into his hand.

But Becky knew better, her nature was incapable of compromise, and at times her mood became one of such intense melancholy that, as she walked by the pool, she

found herself arguing the point whether, when the dear old mother was gone, she had a right to call in her own life, though the answer was always an unhesitating "No."

For suicide may be described as the discredited sanctuary to which the cowardly, the morally weak, and the mentally and physically overwrought flee, recking not what tears, what anguish and ruin follow them to the threshold they so lightly cross.

For so long as there is one human heart to throb with love at our approach, to ache with sorrow at our going, so long as there is one single soul who looks to us for protection, love, or comfort, and from whose lot our extinction would withdraw the sunshine, we have no right to call in our own lives; we must not, we dare not, lay down the load which we have lent the aid of our strength to carry. Even when we are utterly alone, broken-hearted, starving, mere cumbrances on the earth, we yet have no right to go forth unsummoned by our Maker. The best kind of pluck is not dependent on the body, and that pluck should keep us on our feet fighting to the end.

. . . . . .

Becky was too proud to ask Jane the reason of being put in the corner, she supposed it was because of David; but it never occurred to her that Jane believed she was going to marry Kelmersdale, and resented it, thinking that her favourite, Billy, was badly used.

It is a trite saying that a liar wants a thundering long memory, and Becky constantly forgot that particular lie, even omitting to keep up the fiction when she wrote to Féo, inasmuch as she never mentioned Kelmersdale's name.

But as time drew on, Jane repented herself of her tacit quarrel with the creature she loved best in the world, and early in April wrote asking Becky to come up and stay with her at the Bristol, where she was remaining for the present, and feeling very lonely.

Mrs. Bethune was then much better, and would not hear of Becky's remaining at Lavenders on her account; so on a lovely morning that held the breath of spring in it, the girl departed in tears at leaving her mother, but with a vivid feeling that the frost of her life had broken, and that the youth in her was by no means extinguished yet.

She found Jane looking much older, but if she had gone through almost as bad a time as Becky, she had now determinedly pulled herself together, and discussed her plans with the girl as they sat at lunch in the cosy, old-fashioned hotel, where, as Jane expressed it, at least you did not have your food out of coppers.

"If you can get over the morning, my dear," she said, "the afternoon takes care of itself. I've got over *my* bad morning, and I mean to regard the Quekett affair as a hideous dream. To assist me in this, I am advertising the Hill Street house for sale—of course without its contents."

Becky sighed. She loved those green drawing-rooms, with their delicate olive-satin walls on which gold threads shone, the great palms, the exquisite carrying out of the whole colour scheme of green in every detail, and she liked especially the Moorish semicircles of tortoise-shell covered with wrought gold-work set near the ceiling,

through which the electric light shone which David had been so fond of turning on and off in school-boyish fun, because, as he said, you got no electric light in the desert.

"You'll never get anything half so charming again, Auntie," she said; "and where will you go?"

Then the murder was out—Jane Pomeroy meant to travel. Her husband's days of roving had been over when they married, and he hated hotels as only those do who have lived much in them, and he had been glad to settle down, with rich and rare household gods about him. But Jane had a horror of mildew, and thought the breaking up of her establishment a favourable opportunity of renewing her youth, and storing her mind with something to think about in her old age, and she looked astonished when the girl said she would have loved to go, but could not possibly leave her mother in her present state of health.

"Of course I did not expect you to come," said Jane; "what would Kelmersdale say? I should not go abroad in any case until you had been married from wherever I may be."

"Kelmersdale?" said Becky, and frowned. "I have about as much idea of marrying Billy as Kelmersdale."

Overjoyed, Jane threw her arms round the girl's neck and hugged her soundly.

"I did hate it so," she said, "that is why I seldom wrote—and never mentioned it; if you *must* make somebody wretched, Billy certainly has the first claim on you."

"Did David tell you that?" said Becky.

"Yes. And you told him a lie?"

"A first-class lie."

"Because he would not have married Féo else?

Becky was silent, and Jane looked anxiously at the little face, pale now the excitement of arrival was over, and the changes the last few months had made in it hurt her.

"Ah, my dear," she said sadly, "and you also? We all have great enthusiasms when we are young, and great dejections when we grow old; where the light is brightest, the shadow is deepest—especially in our family; but *you* have no right to dejections, yet. We middle-aged people are, after all, happier than you young ones, because we have outgrown our mistakes—you have to live with yours. And I can't forgive you for doing the worst thing you could for David, let alone yourself."

"Don't talk about me," flashed out Becky, "I am beginning to lose interest in myself; it is like turning over the musty pages of a book that positively wearies me. But if you *do* go abroad, Auntie, why not go to Africa? The hotels in the towns are quite decent, Féo says; and you might see how Walter is going on—he certainly wants some one to look after his interests."

"If you are not going to marry that delightful old man," said Jane with great alacrity, "I should not think of going away. I will stay here, where they make me comfortable"—she sighed and thought of Quekett—"for some months at least, and you can spend your time between this and Lavenders as you did before. And after all, child, you are as bright as ever—but there, you

are all *alive* in your family, there are no dead souls walking about in handsome bodies among the Bethunes."

"Auntie," she said sadly, "I am deteriorating, and I know it. When a woman laughs at pain, and outsiders say admiringly, 'how bright she is!' the real woman, the spirituality of her is dead, hopelessly seared; it is only the animal left in her that leaps and rejoices, refusing to think. It's pitiful, but it's Nature eliminating soul in her brutal way, and going one better without it. And I think only increasing age gives that hard brightness as an anodyne; but sometimes"—she paused, and the memory of awful nights rushed over her—"the anodyne won't act."

"You want waking up," said Aunt Jane briskly; "you have been too much fed up on Lavenders. And you also want some new clothes; so do I. Rural joys, my dear, breed slovenliness of person, and are therefore immoral."

Then they drove out to do some shopping, meeting many people they knew by the way, and Becky's spirits went up with a bound, and she thought with horror of her meditations as she walked by the beckoning pool.

At Mason's they encountered Cleopatterer with a black Russian poodle so preposterous that it completely diverted all attention from her absurd and dainty self. Before, he was a flowing hearse of smooth black hair that in billows swept the ground; he was naked and unashamed as to his back and hind legs, and he carried an enormous plume for a tail that would have turned an undertaker green with envy.

Cleopatterer had good accounts of Féo, she said, in a

perfunctory way, but the measure of her waist (unaccountably increased by an inch) just at that moment claimed all her anguished attention.

When she could leave it for a moment, while Becky's dilated eyes were rooted to the sweeping fore-trappings of the poodle as he conducted his own funeral round the room at a slow trot, she told Jane that Shotterbourne Castle was now quite in order, and David's father thoroughly enjoying himself in Paris and elsewhere. She herself looked younger and more elegant than ever as Lady Marchmont, and paid her new husband the tribute of a blush when she mentioned his name.

So at least three out of four people were happy in that quarter, a very fair percentage, as happiness goes, thought Becky, though she and her immediate friends, Kelmersdale and Billy, were scarcely so fortunate.

Becky was delighted to find Billy at the hotel when they went home to tea, indeed she almost embraced him in her joy, which more than ever convinced the poor man that he had no chance with her.

"And who have you been philandering with, Billy?" she said as she nibbled her muffin; "diplomatists must always have the verb 'to philander' by heart; it's part of their education."

Billy, pulling down his waistcoat, for if your heart *be* broken, crumples above it only advertise its condition to a cruel and jeering world, declared he had no time!

"Then you should make some," said Becky, who was rapidly returning to her old careless self from the chastened one of Lavenders, "because to philander saves you

from conjugating the ruinous verb 'to marry,' and is so much pleasanter."

"That is quite true," said Jane unexpectedly. "Married people aren't wretched because of unsuitability of temperament, or because neither of them have brains or stimulating conversation and companionship; there is a much deeper cause for this monotony of marriage, a reason that goes right down into the nature of man, and, nowadays, woman, and that is the system of philandering which is the ideal relation of the sexes. In Platonics, the woman deceives the man, and the man fools the woman; each is at his best and brightest, ardent, intelligent, possibly even willing, intensely eager to please, straining every nerve to keep what it holds but on a precarious footing; but marriage is reality, and sociability is destroyed by enforced intimacy."

"Why not risk the experiment?" said Billy. "Becky is always pitching into us men, but won't give us a chance of proving we are different to what she thinks us."

"'Not for this child,' to parody Kingsley," cried Becky; "be single, Billy, let who will be married! For nature teaches, however man does the opposite, that we live to be happy and not moral."

"I think Féo's mother positively indecent with her blushes and bridal airs," said Jane, with an abrupt change of conversation: "how Marchmont puts up with her, I can't imagine."

"Auntie is jealous," said Becky, but Billy did not smile as once he would have done.

Becky looked at him remorsefully. He was older,

quieter, and his faithfulness was not to be mocked at. *Les absents ont toujours tort*, and for the moment she compared favourably his comical face with the citron skin and finished charm of Kelmersdale.

"Billy," she said suddenly, "we'll forget that we're old and sad, and not particularly beautiful, and we'll do a frivol to-night, and take Jane with us, and paint the town red for at least a week!"

And then they fell to discussing new plays, new distractions, and mapped out a pleasant programme in which, somehow, Hew Kelmersdale found no place, and yet, as events proved, he was never to be more in evidence as Becky's lover, than that season.

CHAPTER XXI

"Life treads on life and heart on heart,
We press too close in church and mart."

In the rush of a season in which Becky was a conspicuous success—for the open devotion of Kelmersdale gave her a singular distinction, and she was so clearly a potential great lady with the great house in St. James's Street only waiting to receive her, that the world treated her with nauseating homage—Becky almost forgot the poor Pioneer and his affairs. But that breathless fortnight in the preceding November, when David had loved, and hated, and loved her again all in one breath, was seldom out of her mind.

As David had for a brief period exploited her in the right set last year, so Kelmersdale made her the fashion this, and she said scornfully to herself that all good things come to a woman through the hand of a man; for though she had been in town for several seasons, it required these two particular men to discover her to the world as a beauty and a wit.

She certainly studied clothes to some purpose, and Jane, remarking one day that as Becky would have all her money eventually, she might as well spend as much as she could now, encouraged her exquisite taste and extravagance to such purpose, that probably the best

turned out, the most envied and imitated girl in town that season, was Becky Bethune.

The women were extremely jealous of her, for she was an illumination that showed them to their lovers as they ought to be, and were not, and indeed there was in her face a quality, by some called soul, by others bedevilment, which in a second changed her from an ordinary girl to a dazzling beauty, and those who once saw, never forgot her, but longed to see her again. And her manners were decidedly better than they had been, thanks to Hew's influence; the irony of the thing often struck her, that David had been present when she gave him cause to be ashamed of her, and was now absent when he might have been proud.

Féo wrote with great regularity, for she really loved Becky, and jealousy was clearly so far from her thoughts, that David was evidently a very wise, as well as kind husband.

David often saw paragraphs about Becky in the papers sent out to Africa, but never discussed them with Féo. And Féo one day read aloud to him an amusing letter from Becky in which the latter set down her amazing vogue under the laconic heading of "Clothes."

"It is the age of Clothes," wrote Becky, "when a woman can go to the very best houses, and with her best man, just so long as she is one of the best, if not the best dressed woman present, and no longer. It is her Clothes that do the trick—the woman inside is of no importance, she is merely the peg on which to hang Clothes; it is the Clothes to which all the best seats, and

the best of everything are given. So I am spending Jane Pomeroy's money in perhaps the most vulgar way that it is possible to spend money, and when you read a lot of rotten stuff about my looks, just you murmur softly to yourself, 'Clothes.'"

And David had not even appeared to listen, but the papers in which her portraits appeared were somehow always mysteriously missing.

Becky took her success coolly, and if at times she abandoned herself to the excitement of her position, felt a little intoxicated by the incense heaped before her very real vanity, she yet knew the hollowness of it all, and was often careless in showing her contempt of it.

And among the crowds of men that she saw daily, and they were not all to be beaten back by Kelmersdale's well-known attitude towards her, not a man appealed to her as an even passable lover when she thought of David; and always she saw Féo happy with him in the life that appealed to her so powerfully, and which must surely make each essential to the other.

Meanwhile, Billy began to realise that Becky would need to possess enormous character if she meant to dismiss the man to whom she was so publicly *affichè*. At Hew's entertainments she was received and treated as the most honoured guest present, and it was to him an exquisite satisfaction when he could persuade her to linger by his side at the head of the grand staircase; and he would persuade himself to the belief that she would be there always, and feel the happiest man alive.

Jane let him choose her horses and dinners, arrange

her amusements, and indeed leaned on him in all social matters, the result being a season of perfectly engineered enjoyment that gave her infinitely more pleasure than it did Becky.

"I don't think I'll come up next year," said the girl towards the end of the season. "I shall get nicknamed an Annual, or something of that sort. Auntie, why don't you solve my difficulty by marrying Hew yourself? You would make a perfectly delightful couple!"

"Poor Hew!" said Jane, rubbing her nose, "and really that house of his suits you to perfection; you never look so well as when in it. I suppose it is the contrast of its dignity with your——"

"Impudence," said Becky, as Jane paused for a word.

"No, for he has improved your manners and conversation wonderfully."

"Disimproved, you mean," said Becky. "I haven't an ounce of originality in me left. But I shall be glad to get back to mother; how sweet and unselfish she has been about my staying here. And she is worrying about Walter, who never writes, though the expedition started for Africa early in June, and things ought to be really beginning to hum."

"Yes, for other people, not for Walter," said Jane significantly.

It was not long after this that Mrs. Pomeroy and the girl went different ways, but it was quite autumn, when Jane was in Scotland, and Becky with her mother, that partly from a sort of log-book kept by the Boss's son and sent home to England, and partly from Féo's letters, in-

formation came to hand of the founding of the settlement, and the many difficulties that first had to be overcome.

And, indeed, Walter's partner wanted all his enterprise, for once arrived at Cape Town his troubles began. It was the wrong time of year for landing at Cape Cross; the surf was rolling mountains high, and three separate times the ship, with himself, Walter, surf-boats, and men on board, vainly attempted to land, then went back to Walfisch Bay, again returned, tried for about a week, till at last the poor man nearly went crazy with worry, and his face got channeled and old, "like a mask," as an eyewitness described it, and it was a mask of despair.

The men grew sullen, and almost mutinied as, day after day, they gazed across that sullen surf at the desolate shore, and said they wanted to go back to England; what good could they do in a place where they could not even land, and not a drop of water to be had within seventy miles?

But distracted as he was, and in the teeth of it all, the Boss actually made a bet that he would deliver the first load of guano in England before Christmas (and he did), and meanwhile decided to put back to Walfisch Bay, leaving one ship at Cape Cross, and hoof the desert to the latter place.

Would that I had the pen of an epic muse, to do justice to the occasion when the mad Englishmen, as they were called, that is the Boss, his son, the engineer, and twenty-five other men, set out on their hundred mile walk across the desert, the magistrate, Germans, natives, and everybody turning out to see them go the way that no

living person had ever been seen to go before. And this was the order of that historic procession, as it went, starting at six o'clock in the morning:

Six donkeys drawing a small cart, then two horses, six sheep, some barrels of water on trolleys, then the men, each carrying his own blanket and provisions. They went as oxen go, marched two hours, and rested two hours, night and day, doing twenty-five miles on the first day, when they got to Swakop Mouth (the last place where there is water), then marched to Rock Bay, shortly having an unpleasant experience during the night, when they lost the donkeys with water, the cart with stores, and the sheep. Walking round and round in a circle they at last sat down, and thirsty and hungry waited till morning, when the Boss went off to investigate, and at last came up with the missing commissariat, all but the sheep, which had made—and it's an ill wind that blows nobody good—a gorgeous supper for hyenas during the night.

It was not a rosy time, for the heat was terrible and locomotion difficult, as they were up to their knees in sand, while washing was a luxury undreamt of by any one. Next day they came to Omoruru, without much hope, dug for water which they actually found, and made a camp there. Then the Boss, engineer, and three men walked on to Cape Cross, leaving the rest in camp, to see if the surf-boat boys had effected a landing from the ship, which they had done. In the meantime a messenger had been sent to Walfisch Bay, and the other ship was brought on the same night. Two days later, after a couple of

nights on the ground spent socially among snakes and puff-adders, they sent for the rest of the men at camp in Omoruru, and the work of fixing up the settlement began.

And to begin with, the condenser was at the bottom of the hold, and until the engineer under immense difficulties had cleverly knocked up a temporary arrangement, they had to depend entirely on barrels of water brought from the ships, whereupon out of pure cussedness such a surf arose that no surf boy dared to put out to sea, and the prospect looked black to the thirsty souls ashore.

But with the hour usually comes the man, and Louis, a magnificent West African, said he would go if the Boss would guarantee the boat; and they all gathered on the shore to watch him. He reached the ship all right, but the surf running down coast, dashed the barrels in tow against the boat, so that he was forced to let them go; so he landed the boat, then with another man of his race, plucky as himself, walked out into the surf, and actually secured one barrel, though both men were as nearly as possible washed away. But Louis was a white man in his ignorance of fear, and though the sea was infested by sharks at all times, he swam out after cargo with the most perfect indifference to consequences.

After the barrel episode, the surf went down in twenty-four hours, and then they worked like navvies, night and day, and part of Sunday, landing plant-houses and stores, all of which had to be brought through surf, unloaded, and carried over the sand, the time taken being two

months. The Boss developed slave-driving capacities of the very first order, was seldom seen to eat, never to sleep, and spent his whole time goading both blacks and whites on, thereby causing marvels to be effected in a very short time. In some photographs taken of him by his son at this time (whose camera turned out invaluable), he appears with a terrible expression of countenance, but always the hungry slave-driver, always on the go, grudging everybody a moment's rest, and spending all his Sundays in prospecting, and looking for more guano.

When completed, the settlement consisted of twenty houses, a big store, a hundred whites, a hundred blacks, twenty-eight donkeys (afterwards replaced by a steam-engine); and the commissariat was entirely managed by the Boss's son, who had firstrate powers of organisation, and whose militia training now stood him in good stead.

Military discipline reigned; everything ordered must be done. A bugle sounded reveillé at 5.30 A.M., then came coffee; work began at six, breakfast was at eight, the dinner-hour one, supper at six, and they turned in about nine. The sun rises at five, sets suddenly at seven, so work after the latter hour is impossible. The men take trucks and donkeys from settlement to salt-pan (three miles away) three times a day, where the guano diggers, white and black, have two separate tents, each with a headman. Stores are sent out to them daily by tramway, fresh meat is procured from cattle post sixty miles away, the natives go backwards and forwards bringing it, there is no green food, but there are plenty of eggs (they have two hundred fowls), pigs, pigeons, a bakehouse, two bakers,

two butchers, a slaughter-house, a *chef*, and all the rest of the food is tinned.

Plenty of fish is to be got by nets from the sea; for venison there is spring-bok and gem-bok, who come six miles to lick salt from the salt-pan; and there is also excellent wild duck. Spring-bok have a dark stripe on their shining sides, and rings on their black curved horns, and are graceful and pretty creatures.

For amusements the men had cricket, football, golf, (on Saturday afternoons all the men from the Guano Islands came in to play cricket), they also played skittles, draughts, dominoes, cards, and had a capital recreation room, and a really splendid library of books, with plenty of papers; and the sitting room of the gentlemen's quarters was as cosy and snug as any at home in England.

Later, when the settlement was established and everything in full swing, Germany sent an officer and some soldiers to keep order, to protect and tax the guano, and check outgoings; and after this, martial law prevailed, and any man who did not obey orders, had his choice of clearing out of the settlement, or being shot. The Germans looked on with admiration at the marvels that had been performed here in so brief a space, which pleased monsieur the slave-driver, but did not for a moment make him relax his efforts.

Even without these men it would be impossible to forget who owned Cape Cross, for the Emperor William is responsible for that very magnificent cross done by Germany's first sculptor in black marble, from which the place itself is named. But he was not first in the field,

for the original cross, from which this one is copied, was placed there by the adventurous Portuguese in 1400, and after some hundreds of years had become so worn away that Emperor William, who heard of this, had it taken down and carried to Germany, where an exact replica was made, though the gunboat that brought it back had to wait outside a whole month, before it could be landed.'

History is silent as to what part Walter took in the doings around him, or whether he walked about at his ease, yarning and singing his sing-songs when he could get any one to listen, but no one knew if he ever contrasted this shore, now humming like an ant-hill with life, growing smug with civilisation, with the desolate place that his had been the first human foot to tread.

But Pen and Pioneer were ever sworn enemies, and the hand that deftly wields the quill, never turned up virgin soil, or opened up new country yet. So in the few scrawled lines Walter occasionally sent home, the missus was spared the sorrow of knowing that all these beautiful shirts, and sundry other masculine comforts so carefully made and packed by herself, had in some unaccountable way got lost *en route;* and as Walter never felt the want of them, and probably they kept warm some other back or backs, perhaps no great harm was done after all.

Then, one day, Becky received a letter from Féo, in which the letter incidentally mentioned that Walter had "heard something" reflecting upon Mrs. Walter's virtue, and had started off up country with the avowed intention to cut out the man's heart, and eat it! And the vision of Walter in his seven-leagued boots, deliberately stalking

and running to earth some poor shivering wretch, to whom the very name of Walter was a terror, so tickled Becky's sense of humour as quite to swallow up her fear of disastrous consequences, though she privately took every opportunity of making particular inquiries just then, as to what the law in Africa was if you happened to kill any one purposely by mistake!

It was not very long after this that a packet addressed in a strange fist reached Mrs. Bethune, and was found to contain a batch of photographs showing the marvellous realisation of what might easily have been but a pioneer's unfulfilled dream, and by the irony of Fate, it arrived at about the same time as in Africa he was receiving his certificate of heart-bankruptcy.

The photographs gave a very complete idea of the Guano Islands, the settlement, the surf-bound coast, the blacks and whites at work and at play; and among these homely presentments of quite ordinary life and scenery, one looked in vain for that typical African desert, with its palm trees, and sand, and camel, and in the foreground the traveller dying of thirst, with which in our childhood's days we were painfully familiar.

One photograph represented a half dug out island, showing rough, uneven walls of blackish colour, the surface and substance not unlike soot, with an immense number of filled bags in the foreground, and blacks stooping over, carrying, and bending under others. The Union Jack flew in the background, and in another photograph some one was running it up, while the Boss, snatching a moment from his work, looked complacently

on—for they had dared and done a lot before they ran up that flag!

Then came more and more islands and more photographs of the neat settlement, with its tramway sweeping round to the shore, and pictures of the poor innocent seals with their coats on, and anon of the coats hung out to dry with never a seal inside. But what amused Becky and her mother most, was the assortment of old hats, trousers, waistcoats, turbans—the sweepings in short of an old-clo' shop—arranged without regard to shape or size on the Hottentots, and in which with swelling pride they "sat" for their photographs. One real "lydy" stood prominently out of a group, dressed in a broadly striped gown with large sleeves, and bangles on her crossed black wrists, while around her were relations of all sizes, and all more or less covered, the very children had shawls thrown over them with which to face the camera, so fierce is the rage for clothes that animates them, while the one naked urchin present was the only unashamed and graceful figure of the lot.

In another photograph the men, both black and white, were playing at cricket on the sand, with nothing in sight to remind them of their toil nor yet to remind their noses, for the guano has next to no smell.

"And with new-laid eggs, too, and every comfort, really they do themselves very well," grumbled Becky, considering the fowl-house, with chanticleer in the foreground. "And kidneys!" she added, as next the slaughter-house came into view, "and that handsome jolly *chef* looks as if he knew how to devil them, too."

"Yes, but not for women," said her mother, "evidently there is not one white woman in the settlement."

And then came a new and wonderful Hottentot hut, like an elongated haystack of terrific height, apparently built of brambles, with a rag thrown in here and there, and in the foreground, suspended from a tree stump, a very prosaic and civilised English zinc pail. Yonder, the snowy tent of the guano-diggers, symmetrical, and with little ventilators at the top, made a striking contrast to the Bushmen's ragged dwelling.

"Mother!" cried out Becky suddenly, "can this be *Walter!*" Was this man with a striking resemblance to Garibaldi—flowing beard, flannel shirt, and all—Walter?

Becky looked at the boots, and doubted no more. Yes, it was Walter! But his air was tragic, he had an air of being overweighted with glory, and in another picture he showed as a small lonely figure silhouetted against the sky, on the top of a guano hill, discoverer of all he surveyed, if not actual boss of it, and there was something about that figure Becky did not like, and she wished he would break his long silence, and tell them what he really thought and felt.

There followed half-a-dozen exquisite little etchings —for they could scarcely be called photographs—of the surf-boats putting out, and riding those stupendous breakers, thirty and forty feet high, that ended in such deceptively innocent ripples on the shore. Yonder are the good ships waiting safely outside "the cruel, crawling foam," only it does not crawl, it leaps upon, and tears

the stout ships timber from timber, if they venture too near it, as more than one wreck has proved.

But to Becky, the Guano Islands were perhaps the most fascinating of all. There was something stupefying in those ugly low mounds of stuff, and in what they represented, and the dull brown powder seemed to change into gold and sparkle before her eyes. "You are happiness, you are power, you are love, and all the virtues," she said to herself, "but you are not health, and that is best of all!"

And then Becky's heart leaped, for on a lonely spot in the Sierra mountains, ten miles inland (where gem-bok are found), with rocks in the foreground shaped like monsters, clearly of volcanic origin, and between which a glacier had worn a smooth steep channel, perched on a boulder in the foreground, a mere speck of civilisation in the midst of a wilderness of desolation, was an English hunter, gun in hand, and looking as if he had been born there—David Moray.

She lingered long over it, then when her mother waxed inquisitive, declared she was looking everywhere for the inevitable missionary, though possibly he had been turned into chops and steaks on the way.

"Do you remember Walter's story," she said, "about the missionary, and the black man with three wives? The black was all right except in being so much married, but when the missionary told him so, he couldn't understand his logic, and after a bit the missionary went away to another station for a time, and when he came back, the black man had only one wife. The holy man

was awfully delighted at the other's reformation, praised him no end; to which the black complacently replied that, feeling how wrong his manner of life was, he had kept the wife he liked best, and eaten the other two!"

The series of photographs was fitly closed by a beautiful one of the Cross erected by the German Emperor, with an inscription in German, and beneath it a Portuguese one, which none of those who saw it might decipher.

Meanwhile, the settlement waxed proud, and attracted to itself considerable attention from the English and German press, and a portrait and biography appeared of the Boss, in which he was called the Guano King; but the finder of the stuff, the pioneer and explorer who had opened up the desert country, so that the settlement was used as a half-way house at which people every day stopped, was not even mentioned.

And Billy had said things, and Becky had mused on the extraordinary knack money had of flying away from the family, and Jane Pomeroy angrily called the boy a fool, and the old mother sighed, and thought of the noble unemployed, and who so fit to enlarge their borders as their own brother?

And so time passed, and one day Becky realised with a start, that it was exactly a year since Walter had gone back to Africa, and David Moray had a few days after come into her life.

CHAPTER XXII

"Heaven but the vision of fulfilled Desire,
And Hell the Shadow from a soul on fire,
Cast on the Darkness into which ourselves
So late emerged from, shall so soon expire."

BECKY, walking one afternoon in the garden at Lavenders, suddenly burst out laughing; the cause of her mirth was a little flower named "Love-lies-bleeding," and she could never walk past the plot in which it grew in summer without being tickled by an absurd recollection that it suggested, no matter how heavy her heart might happen to be.

For it had chanced one hot summer afternoon, years ago, that she was taking the air on the south side, which is not overlooked by windows, when she met an elder, then staying in the house, and he, being a very devout man, great at spiritual exercises, long-winded at grace, a champion deliverer of tracts, and so meek in spirit that Moses would have yielded the *pas* to him, had made a great impression on Becky, "for here," thought she, "is at least *one* good man, and that in spite of his religion."

It happened that as they walked, Becky looked down on a little flower in the plot, and she asked the elder what its name might be, to which he replied, "That is 'Love-lies-bleeding,' but I am sure *you* will never need to

complain of lack of love!" and thereupon he gripped her so tight round the waist, that her breath was gone; yet did she struggle violently to free herself, only he held on with a strength and tenacity astounding in one so white-headed and old. And so for a space they tussled grimly and silently, for at any moment the door behind them might open (and his arms were iron), till breathless and dishevelled, she hit him foully below the belt, and thus escaped to her room, where she laughed, and laughed, and could not stop herself till the bell rang for tea, when she had to go down, and sit next the elder, and hear him say grace, and receive from his hand toast and blackberry jam! And I vow that not one hair of his venerable head was out of place, and his benevolent china-blue eyes beamed even more holiness than usual on all around him, while Becky felt she must begin laughing again, or die. And to that day, she did not know if the cream muslin frock she wore (and through which her lovely arms and neck showed), or a flash of the old Adam that even religion will not subdue in a man, was accountable for that elder's fall; but she finally came to the conclusion that too much religion was as bad for a man as none at all.

The orange glory of the great chestnut tree had burnt itself out into a sodden blackness, the creepers no longer flamed against the wall in their rose-scarlet, but Becky resolutely crushed down despondency as her feet did the dead leaves that littered every path, for after all, as with most unhappy people, it was the spring that always hurt her most.

A servant came out to her with two letters that had

come by the afternoon post—her hand shook as she took them, for one was from David, the first letter she had ever had from him in her life.

She kissed the seal, and holding it to her heart, went straight to the place where they had parted, and opened it trembling (for what could he have to say to her, or she to him), only to find that it concerned Walter's affairs alone.

It was dated from Cape Cross, and ran as follows:—

"My dear Miss Becky,—There is trouble, of which you have heard something; it is about Walter's wife. You know he is of a very faithful nature, and thought that as he had remained true to her, she might have been true to him; but he was away from her nearly two years, looking for the guano, and coming home, then he helped to fix up the settlement, and start the natives—and the fortune has cost him his wife. When at last he was free to go to her, he found her with a three months' old child on her knee. And he cannot find the man; and she will not tell. He has left her, but says it is the hardest knock he ever had in his life, and he wants your mother to adopt his little girl, and bring her up."

"He must bear it," cried Becky aloud, and the hardness of her own voice startled her. "He has *got* to bear it. Why should he expect happiness more than the rest of us? It is not for us—oh! not for us! We were not born to be happy. I do not know if it is our own fault, or the way we are made—but we are unbreakable,

we will not yield, and yet we must—oh, we must; God says, 'If you will not yield one way, I will make you another;' and so we suffer, we all suffer, but still we do not yield, because we do not know the way. And Walter wants to thrust that poor little savage, his child, into our civilised life, to suffer, to die, as *we* do! We will not take her—we will not!"

Her thoughts swerved suddenly to the mother.

"Poor Tolly! Walter was away so long—and perhaps she and the child were starving, and he never wrote, and she thought he would not come back—we cannot tell what her temptations were—but I did not think he would care so much."

David did not mention Féo in his brief letter, and only asking to be remembered to the Missus, ended abruptly as "Yours always."

She quivered at that, and kissed his signature of plain David, then for a long while walked up and down over the sodden grass, thinking of the poor boy who had expected impossibilities, expected a woman to remain true to him through over two years of absence; but one does not like to think of him arriving in all his new-born triumph at having achieved success, eager to see the little daughter he so passionately loved, and to find, not her alone, but his wife's arms newly filled . . . then surely the honest, brave heart turned suddenly sick, and his strength was as water, and all the gold he had found for others as naught; and then came the mad, frantic search for the man who had betrayed him, and whom he would have killed, as he had once said, with as little

compunction as a seal. There was the stubborn silence of the woman, the leave-taking of his child, and then the seven-leagued boots were marching on again, and how sore a heart they carried, who shall say? For he wanted so little—only loyalty, honour—from what he loved, and they had failed him.

Becky pulled herself together—she must go in, but she would not tell her mother about Walter's wife yet; ill news will always keep, if people would only believe it—and ill news was such an everyday thing in that family.

> "And some are dead
> And some are gone away,"

she said aloud, with a little catch in her throat, then, as she turned in her walk, thought that if she had been David's wife she would not have been left behind at Cape Town while he went up to the settlement. The helplessness of woman, the selfishness of man, struck her afresh, and yet after all, is it not Nature's law working out unsparingly to the individual, well for the race, that a man should be brutal, should prevail, and so subdue woman, as without it she is a dangerous rebel, and the home neglected. He must leave her to bear her fruit in pain and loneliness . . . it is not *he* who is cruel, but Nature, and chivalry counts for nothing, or but very rarely, in Nature's laws.

Suddenly Walter's round-hand looked up reproachfully at her from the outside of the unopened letter she had held all this time, and she tore open the envelope with a sinking heart.

"I have left my wife," he said, "but from no fault of

mine. I thought as I had been true to her she might have been true to me. It is the worst 'crack' I ever had in my life."

There was but little more, and the fortune he had found seemed to bring him no comfort, nor did the thought of the future give him any pleasure. And had he done any better for Becky than for himself in sending David Moray to her, and so waking her to love and pain? Indeed, no one seemed a pin the better for the guano; and if at first the hiding of it by Nature, and the finding of it by Walter, had seemed a real African romance, the prose of it was most noticeable now, and she wished with all her heart he had never taken that little walk of his across the desert, but lived out his happy, wandering life obscurely.

The short winter's afternoon closed in, darkness swooped down on Becky, but she was not lonely, for David pervaded all that place, and whenever she walked there, she felt him near. Presently she sat down on the log, and stretched out her hand as if to touch him. . . . if she had loved him then, as she loved him now, she could not have sent him away—to do his duty, and leave her to do hers. In the glow of battle, we give recklessly, but in the hospital of suffering we have time to painfully count the cost.

And absence and loneliness will but feed true love, as it starves the false, and she longed fiercely to know how it was with him . . . if his love, too, had grown like a gourd . . . jealously she asked herself how all Féo's beauty and love had affected him . . . as if in answer to her summons, like a pale phantasm he seemed to step

out of the mists of the evening, and stand before her. Boldly she asked him—

"David, have you been happy?"

And he answered grimly—

"No—but I have made *her* happy."

And she was glad—though she knew that if she were a really good woman, she would be sorry.

Yes, he had made Féo happy; her letters were proof of that, but perhaps she had never touched that highest point of love which desires, not that a man should make *you* happy, but you *him* . . . perhaps that was beyond the poor little girl who had asked so very little, only to follow him like his dog; hers was always a humble idea of love, to be near him, and occasionally caressed by him, neglected even, if he were only sure to come back to neglect her again.

The wheels of Kelmersdale's dogcart coming swiftly round the circular drive dragged Becky's thoughts sharply away from the Morays. He was to have entertained guests at home through November, but already he was here, and she went in without alacrity, and found him waiting for her alone in the drawing-room.

He came quickly towards her, for to be in her company gave him always a sense of refreshment, as when a cool breath blows across an autumn bed of mignonette.

To him, she now and always struck the note of preciousness. Is it the utter aloofness from man that gives so rare a grace, so pure an atmosphere to the maiden, that the married woman, however beautiful, cannot create about her?

"My child," he said, as she came slowly up to him, with all the sadness of the autumn evening in her still eyes, and immobile face, "I could not stay away from you any longer. So I pleaded illness, was a most discourteous host, and all my guests have departed."

He led her to a chair near the fire, brought a footstool, then stood on the hearthrug, looking down on her bent head.

Perhaps he, too, realised then that things to-day were precisely as they had been a year ago, and yet such unselfishness had love taught him, he would have given up all his own hopes of happiness to see *her* happy. The intensity of his own love had brought him to respect hers, and her enormous capacity for suffering, and power of hiding it, had startled and touched him. She would not wear her heart for daws to peck at; it was one of the things for which he loved her, that she never cried out under her pain; she might show temper, be capricious, even a little hard, but her pluck was tremendous, all her life she had suffered more because she always kept silence under the blow, swung back laughing, as if unhurt, while she bled inwardly.

And he had something to tell her, something that might hit her harder than she had ever been hit before, or, on the other hand, cure her.

"I heard from my brother to-day," she said, rousing herself; "he is in great trouble about his wife, who has been untrue to him. If it will not bore you, I will show you some photographs of the settlement."

"David Moray is up there now," said Hew, "I saw

Lady Marchmont as I passed through town. She is very anxious about Lady Moray"—he paused, but the down-bent head did not stir—"and wishes her to come home before next January."

Her head bent a little lower, as if struck, arrested by something in his tone, but he could not see her face. There was a perceptible pause before he spoke again.

"They did not think it wise, in her state of health, that she should accompany her husband to Cape Cross," he said.

Becky's face flamed, and the room, and everything in it, shrivelled up as a scroll before her eyes. She sprang to her feet, and thrust her hair back as one distraught; she had never let herself go like this before, never realised the jealousy of which her strong savage nature was capable. Jane had called all the Bethunes savages; well, she knew herself now for the worst of the lot, and felt only that she hated Féo, hated her with all her heart and soul.

Cruelly it came home to the man then, that his name, and great estates, and power to give all that satisfies most women did not weigh a feather's weight with this broken-hearted woman, crying out for the simplicity and humbleness of a thing that the poorest woman in the kingdom might own.

"Oh!" she cried wildly, "one gives away a treasure blindfold, and out of it grows a yet more priceless treasure. With some few happy women, all rivers run to the sea . . . how could the Madonna ever have looked sad with that child in her arms? All the shame and obloquy in the world would not have weighed a groat with me against

that real, precious little boy. To be a mother, and to love always, and to be always loved by the man you love —these are the only two things that make it worth while being a woman!".

Kelmersdale looked away from the agony in the girl's eyes, he could not bear to see it, and he had thought she was getting over it, that philanthropy might partly fill her heart, and the royal progress through life of a very great lady satisfy her taste for the beautiful, as well as her ambition, and the vanity that he knew was in her.

And instead, she stood there desolate, like a Cinderella upon whom all finery and pleasure, all her trumpery joys hung like rags about her.

Suddenly she drew a deep breath, and looked up full in his eyes, and the two naked souls read each other, knew that as he loved her, so she loved David, and nothing could ever diminish either the one or the other.

In a flash she saw herself life-tenant of that splendid mansion in St. James's, wife to this kind, citron-faced man, and to Féo, with her child in her arms, and David beside her, what?

A new light was breaking for the young wife, and Becky did not slight motherhood as is the fashion nowadays, all the heaped-up love in her that till a year ago she had denied men, flowed out without stint to little children, giving her the purest enjoyment she had ever known.

"My child," said Kelmersdale, and laid a gentle hand on her head, and gradually the trembling in Becky's body ceased, and she came back to herself in horror of what she had done and said outside it.

"So my fate is fixed," she said, and her voice was strained and harsh in the tremendous effort she was making over herself. "To bring up Féo and David's children in the way they should not go, and certainly be forbidden the house. But I wonder she did not tell Janë and me"—afterwards she knew the prohibition had come from David, silently raging at the prospect of this new tie that ought to bind him closer to Féo, but that he knew inexorably would not.

"My child," said Hew gravely, "you cannot go on living this life for ever—it will kill you. Come to me—and bring your mother, she can have as many rooms as she likes, and be as retired as she pleases."

Becky lifted one hand on his shoulder, and looked earnestly in his face, and she had the truest eyes that were ever in a woman's head.

"But you understand, Hew," she said, "that I can't? If you were different to what you are, I might, but I won't cheat you."

"Dear," he said, as she dropped her hand, "you don't realise what the loneliness of your life will be, when your mother has left you. It is when you see happy women, with their children growing up about them, that you will realise how terrible it is, to be the first consideration with no one in the world. You will always be that with me—but what could I do for your happiness, if you were not my wife? And some day, if you will not be kind to me, I may go abroad, and wander too."

"Don't," said Becky, rubbing her cheeks to bring some

colour into them, and his heart sank; she had by sheer strength of will pulled herself out of her hour of weakness, and was as much beyond his reach as ever.

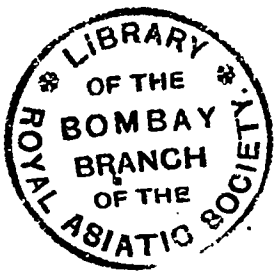
Yet he knew that if he had renewed his vitality beside her, drunk of the cup of youth and enthusiasm that she had deigned to share with him as casual companion, he could yet have given her a far fuller, more intellectual life than she could ever have had with David Moray.

For David represented a type of man that did not understand women one half as well as Hew did, but by instinct and experience accomplished what the finer, subtler natures cannot; for the more complex the man, the less likely he is to get his heart's desire, and inwardly Hew commented bitterly enough on the fact he had so often noted, of how the lover who is a real blister to a woman, having no more comprehension of her than if she were made of other material than flesh and blood, will yet hold her against the faithful love of another man who understands her intimately, and by virtue of his knowledge, has the power to make her intelligently happy. And Becky was artist as well as woman, even if she achieved nothing.

The door opened, and Mrs. Bethune came in, bearing the cherished photographs, and Hew looked at them all, and was his usual charming self; but as he drove back to Highclere at breakneck speed that night, his face was stern, and he said to himself—

"Everything hinges on what happens in January. Few women have stomach to witness the domestic joys of the

man they love—to them he usually becomes a thing undesirable, tame, contemptible, and a really proud woman rarely supports a married man as a lover—she outside on the doorstep, and the wife by the hearth, within. And so, Becky, my own little girl, you may come to me after all—after January."


LIBRARY OF THE BOMBAY BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY.

CHAPTER XXIII

"What! from his helpless creature be repaid,
Pure gold for what he lent him, dross allayed,
Sue for a debt he never did contract,
And cannot answer—oh the sorry trade."

Lord and Lady Moray arrived in England on Christmas Eve, and went straight to the Marchmonts, till they had found a furnished house in town to suit them, and Féo wrote on the very evening of their arrival, begging Becky to come up, as she was nervous and ill, and wanted her "backbone," as she often called the girl. David, she said, was very keen on their finding a place for themselves immediately, and though she did not mention it, Cleopatterer had evidently got on David's nerves, as usual.

Jane Pomeroy was then at the Bristol, having finally arranged to let the Hill Street house furnished as it stood, and Becky wrote Féo that it was quite impossible to leave her mother at present, but Jane would help her about everything much better than she could, and then ensued a little silence, and that unhappy Christmas time, when our beloved dead steal out, and sit beside us in the ingle-nook, was over; and with the coming of the New Year, Nature seemed to turn in her slumber, and send her trumpet-voice echoing through the land, "Awake! for the day is here."

Already the days lengthened; beneath the brown, tightly folded knobs on the trees, showed a vivid green if you scratched the brown; the winds of heaven scoured the earth, and swept the roads bare and clean, and the great workshop once more stood open, in which none of the machinery ever goes wrong, or turns out faulty or inharmonious work.

Kelmersdale was in Paris, for his nerves had got almost beyond control as the time drew near that would test the situation between David and Becky, and he would not return till early in February. Meanwhile he kept in touch with her by writing most delightfully every day.

Jane wrote that Féo was very happy, but very delicate; she was now comfortably settled in a house in Bruton Street, but fretted so much about not seeing Becky, that they feared it might have a prejudicial effect on her health. Had not Becky better come up and face it for once and all? Jane said, and added, "You have before now carried through more difficult things than this, and with your tremendously strong will you have only to make up your mind to this one, and you will do it brilliantly."

But something in Becky struck, and would not be coerced, she was what a man would describe as "sick" at the idea of seeing David. She had lied to him, and it wanted more stomach than she could bring to the occasion, and even the strong sense of duty that was one of her few virtues could not goad her to the desired sticking-point.

But one day, as she walked alone on the high-road, a hustling wind blowing about her skirts, and painting

her cheeks with purest carmine, she saw in the distance David rapidly approaching her, and stopped short as one struck by a bullet, fighting the unreasoning impulse to climb over the hedge, run anywhere to escape from him.

He reached her before the colour had died out of her face, and in exasperation, he mentally called her a fraud, a heartless jade, who had set him in the forefront of battle, and looked calmly on from afar at his reverses and disfigurements, while she minded her complexion, and observed those counsels of perfection that result in the peace, and therefore beauty, of both mind and body.

He greeted her with formal politeness, and she answered him with composure; though her inquiries for his wife stuck half-way, she only said, "Féo is well?" then rushed on, not waiting for an answer, to inquire for Walter and all those wonders of the settlement that David had seen.

He fell in with her mood. Féo's message would keep, and he told her all that she wanted to know, while she stole covert glances at him, and found him thin and restless, by no means the careless young man who had dropped casually in at Hill Street on a certain November afternoon.

"The fortune," said he, "would be nothing like a million, as was at first supposed, for the expenses of working the concern were enormous, owing to the surf-bound coast, and guano had gone down in the market, the new earth-foods discounting it severely, and was worth less than half as much a ton as formerly."

"How does Walter bear his trouble?" she inquired.

"He is not the first man who has been deceived," said David.

She stole a glance at his grim face, and a tremor seized her lest her own bad quarter of an hour were about to begin.

But as she looked away, he saw her face pallid, and his own changed.

"I don't think he will ever be the same man again," he said. "He sent his love to you and the 'glorious old mother'; he does not know that she has been ill."

"But apart from his wife, is he any the happier for this fortune?"

"It is the life he likes best, and he is constantly on tap when anything dangerous or difficult has to be done. For instance, the Boss woke up one night to find a black standing by his bedside in the moonlight. The beggar said a German officer was dying for want of water at a place three hours' walk away; so Walter was found, and he fetched an ox and two Hottentots, took water and brandy and set off. They were all night looking for the man, and at last Walter fired his gun, the German answered with a revolver; then they found and picked him up. He had been drinking salt water, and his limbs were frightfully swollen, but he recovered all right. The night before I left the settlement Walter spent the whole of the night on the seashore with his gun, watching for a particular bird I wanted to bring home—and got it."

"How like Walter!" cried Becky, for the first time turning her face full on David, and for a moment the two looked at each other as comrades, and the brown

high-road changed to Jane Pomeroy's green drawing-room where they had come to so close an understanding of each other's hearts.

Her spirits rose; why did he talk so much unless he, too, were nervous, anxious to put off the moment of attack?

She stole a glance at his waistcoat, but the bulge in it had vanished, and he caught the look, and answered it.

"I have good news for you about that," he said; "you did not kill the Indian—though you gave him some tidy scars to boast of—and he is happy now with his girl, for like a true woman, she did nothing but fret after him when he was gone, and was delighted to see him when he returned. I have restored the warrior's head to Pullenchiri, and the bridegroom has got over his terror at my sudden appearance. They are all as jolly as sand-boys."

"Thank God!" cried Becky, stopping short in the road, "I shall have one ghastly dream the less now. It was good of you to take all that trouble—had you far to go?"

"It was just what Walter would call a little walk—four hundred miles or so. Féo was with the Soltamores," he added, as if answering the thought in her mind that he was pretty frequently away from his wife.

"And Martha Quekett—did you find out who killed her?"

"It was Quekett. It appears," he paused, "that there was a real 'lady' in the case, and Martha, who had put up with his betting, stuck at that. She threatened to tell her mistress about the concealed man, so one night Quekett, quietly and unknown to the Indian, strangled

her. The sale of the diamonds gave them plenty of ready money, and the start they had, enabled them to get clear off. Quekett has gone to America, and as an open verdict was returned, he is perfectly safe. But probably Nemesis has found him in the shape of the 'lady.'"

They were almost at the gates of Lavenders by now; they were through them, and the house door close, when by a dexterous turn of the wrist David engineered her to the right, under the close arch of holly, and marched her along till they came to the log by the side of the pool, where he made her sit down.

"Do you know," said Becky with great nonchalance, though inwardly furious at being thus tamely led like a beast to the slaughter, "that this green pool is a perfect sink of wicked words? I bottle them up in the house, who could say them with Spurgeon's texts all looking on? So I bring them out here—and drown them!"

"I can quite believe it," he said; "but now about Féo. She wants you, and I have done my share of the work your—lie imposed on me; it is now your turn, and you must do yours."

Becky's face turned scarlet. He was pinning her to her lie, and the blaze of anger and contempt in his steel grey eyes hurt her.

A mad longing to escape out of his presence seized her, but he barred the way, and where they had so often met in spirit, and she had granted all that in the flesh she had denied him, they faced each other like enemies, their faces sharp and haggard with the passion that mastered them.

"You told me that you were going to marry Kelmersdale, knowing that, so long as you remained single, I would not marry Féo. Now what excuse have you for thrusting me into hell, and, if I had been a bigger brute than I am, *her* into a deeper one?"

"You have made her happy," said Becky, "and her happiness was the first consideration. I had rather be a liar than a dishonourable woman."

"No," he said, and his voice and eyes were stern, every line of the clean-shaven face hard as iron, "it was your conceit, your overweening pride, because you could not bear to see yourself soiled in the smallest particular. With you it must be all take, and no give; it was to save your self-esteem from being wounded that you did it, not from honour, from morality, nor high principle. Who are you, to dare to play thus at pitch-and-toss with human souls? If you had really loved me, you would have thought of *my* happiness before hers, and sacrificed yourself and your hellish pride."

The words were cruel, more, they were selfish, but by the bitterness of some men's speech may be measured the love they feel for what they are wounding, and the lines Becky had carved on that thin face cried aloud to her for pity, and sent a great wave of pain through her heart.

He saw her whiten, and a feeling of intense curiosity impelled him to ask her if she had ever, at any time, really loved him?

"Take off your hat," she said suddenly, and taken by surprise, he did so, showing the capful of gold, that gave him back something, but not all of the unimpaired fresh-

ness and virility that had been his. He looked less of the sportsman, more of the man of the world as he stood before her, and she put her hands behind her back that she might not reach up, and touch that sunny, beloved head.

"There is nothing to be said, nothing to be done," went on David in a strange level voice, "but to keep her as happy as we can. She wants you, and you must come to her. I will keep out of the way, only you must take your share. When will you come? It's *your* work, and you must see it out."

For a moment she did not speak, and the two young faces measured each other proudly and sternly, then she said—

"I will come to-morrow."

"I will tell her," he said, and without further look or word departed.

Thus does the flesh, that in the spirit we have worshipped and idealised, return to us, after many days, to disappoint and wound us; thus do the lips that we have hungered to kiss, open, not in blessing, but to curse us.

CHAPTER XXIV

"All that is by Nature twain
Fears, or suffers by the pain
Of separation; Love is only
Perfect when itself transcends
Itself, and one with that it loves
In individual Being blends."

Féo was lying on a sofa, with Becky sewing beside her, and chattering nineteen to the dozen, though she had rejoiced in the company she loved best in the whole world next to David's, for a full week.

It would be hard to say how this love between the two, especially Féo's for Becky, had become so strong; for years, though in a sense cousins, they had been but mere acquaintances with nothing in common, but the staunch way in which Becky had rallied to Féo's side, when David came home, had entirely won the girl's heart, and her weakness had appealed irresistibly to Becky, as the weak inevitably do to the strong. Like children who must be protected, loved, and scolded, they become perilously dear through their helplessness, and Becky was not all unhappy as she took what David had grimly called her "share" in her own handiwork.

David was not present; indeed, except when hunting, he had always either just gone out, or was soon expected in, when Becky came to Bruton Street, and as she never

stayed to lunch or dinner, the three of them were not for one moment together in the same room. Féo often lamented this unlucky disposition of Providence, but was too content, and full of the blissful future to dwell on anything else, and often declared that as Becky had been the one thing wanting in Africa to complete her perfect happiness, so now her cup was completely filled to overflowing by that young woman's presence.

And an even deeper bond was established between them by Féo's discovery of Becky's unsuspected but passionate love of little children, and they spent hours in sewing at certain cunning little garments. There was one special bit that Becky took home to the Bristol, and worked at when others slept, holding it often at arm's length that her tears should not fall on, and make it unlucky. Love had ripened, matured the lovely bit of human ivy that had fed on David's strength, and been nourished by it; and often when she was still, the hush of approaching young motherhood made of her a thing wonderful and holy, so that Becky would hold her breath; and gradually in her mind, Becky's concentred thoughts shifted gradually from David to this child of his that was to be.

Amidst Féo's impressions and recollections of Africa—and she loved the climate and liked the people—she included some amusing ones of David's when he went up to see Walter at the settlement.

"I have never seen your brother, you know," she said, laughing; "but David took Prescott with him, and when they came back I said to the man, 'Mr. Bethune is a

splendid man, is he not?' And Prescott smiled, and coughed respectfully, and I *knew* he was thinking, how could a man be splendid who had probably never worn a pair of properly pressed trousers in his life, but fastened them up with rope, who laced up his boots with string?

"'He is a wild man, my lady,' he said. 'Very brave, of course; but he does not wear clothes like other people, and he sleeps on the ground, and cooks and kills his food, and eats alone; he is a savage in short—but his lordship loves him.'"

Becky burst out laughing; Féo was a good mimic, and had produced the man's manner and voice to perfection.

"It was such a joke," went on Féo; "but the Boss made Prescott lend a hand with the guano, and David had to help too!"

"Can any one who likes go up to the settlement?" inquired Becky.

"Yes. Every one stops there now that the desert country is opened up, with the settlement used as a half-way house, at which Hottentots and others rest. Scarcely a day passes that people do not come, and they all have to pay toll in one shape or another, for the water that enables them to continue their journey, in sheep, in oxen, or money, and they all have to work—the Boss sees to that. David says some comical things happen there.

"One day they saw some people coming across the desert, and they presently walked into the settlement—thirteen Ovampas all over six feet. The headman walked in front in a Newmarket coat and tall hat, both very dilapidated, and nothing else on whatever. Nobody has ever been able to

understand their language, or why they came or whence; but they came and they stayed. They were given tents, and set to loading surf-boats. On Sundays they disappeared (how did they know it was Sunday?), and spent the day in tent, singing or making a moaning sound. A black hand would be poked out for food; but on Monday morning they all turned up for work, and apparently greatly refreshed by their religious exercises."

"Walter understands the Hottentot talk," said Becky; "does David?"

"No. Their language is all clicks of the teeth; no one understands them. They talk Dutch to the whites, and are more civilised than other natives—in fact, they look upon all the rest as slaves. They are extremely small, while the Damaras and Ovampas, David says, are remarkably fine men, and the Berg-Damaras are pirates and cut-throats.

"David just got in for a really fine thing done by the Boss's son, Harold. You know that wrecks on that shore are common things? Already two steamers of five hundred tons each—the one laden with stores for the settlement, the other with guano homeward bound—have gone to pieces in that cruel serf; but a ship in no way concerned with them was one morning discovered about two hundred yards out, being torn to pieces by the surf, which was rolling mountains high, and those on shore gazed helpless, as the surf-boys said it was certain death to put out and attempt a rescue.

"Harold bore it as long as he could—which was not long—but by no urging could he get the surf-boys to move. They positively defied him and his authority, so

he turned round and said *he* was going—and who volunteered? No one answered, but Louis, who adored the boy, stepped up to his side; then first one man, then another came out, till there were seven in all, and they started. David says that only those who have seen it can have any idea of what facing that surf means; and after all, they could not get near the ship. The captain begged them to go back, and not sacrifice their lives uselessly. But Harold went on" (Féo's eyes sparkled), "and Louis got the boat as near the ship as possible, but would not risk too much, because it was Harold's life against all those strangers', and Harold could not make him go nearer, and the ropes thrown from the ship all fel short. Then Louis went a bit closer; at last they caught the rope, but at that moment huge seas struck them, and nearly carried them on to the wreck. It was touch and go then, but the boat righted herself, pulled out of the surf, and they brought off twenty-seven men in the surf-boat —wasn't it glorious? Harold stuck to his eye-glass all the time, and never turned a hair. David says he is a great tease, and just before they got ashore he said to the half-drowned captain, 'I'll give you five pounds for your ship,' and ultimately he *did* get it for twenty pounds.

"He is an awfully cool chap," went on Féo. "Some one told David that when he and the Boss went from Waterloo, just as the train started, he leaned out of the window, surveying the assemblage that had come to see them off, and remarked—

"'Well, you *are* a damned common crowd!'"

Becky laughed, and then said—

"And David was one of the seven men?"

"Yes," said Féo shyly, "David was there. The others tried to stop him, because he was married, they said, but he was the most reckless, next to Harold, of the lot."

Becky's needle remained stationary. She saw David launched on that almost forlorn hope, careless of his life, and with but little thought of Féo, and her heart condemned him.

"And Walter," she said, "was *he* there?"

"He was up at the sealing islands, but returned just after."

"Poor boy. But David says he takes his Tolly's defection far too much to heart, that over there such ties are not binding; it is only your brother's honourable mind that makes him see things as he does. Yet David has even nicer ideas of honour. I have had but one rival with David, and that is sport. If he seemed cold to me before we married, he was cold to all other women—he even quarrelled with *you*, dearest—and he has been just as indifferent to them all ever since. But his seems a type they all admire. Cissy set her cap furiously at him, and he never even saw it. It would not trouble him if there were not a single woman in the world—except me," added Féo, blushing prettily.

But incidentally it came out that she was much alone in Africa, and had gone on very few expeditions with David.

"The other women got into some awfully tight places," said Féo, "and you see, when he went away, I always knew he would come back to me. Before we married, I *didn't* know. At first I wanted to go with him, but

after I knew—about baby, you know," and she coloured up charmingly, "of course I didn't."

Becky nodded approvingly. Féo had unswervingly done her part towards making David happy, in leaving him perfectly free to follow his bent. And she had been brave, too, for a husband's constant absence from her side is a heavy but answerless weight of accusation against a wife that no true woman can face without a sinking heart.

Becky doubted if she herself would have stayed behind with such sweet equanimity, though to be sure a dead calm is infinitely more acceptable to most husbands than a tornado.

"If you go out again, you must leave—*it*—with me," said Becky one day.

But Féo shyly said she could not do that. In her frail body there dwelt a mother's heart that a year ago no one would have given her credit for, least of all Cleopatterer, who came occasionally, but was so much taken up with Marchmont, who was not well, that she was really glad for the odious Becky to give as much of her time to Féo as she did.

Féo had a theory, delightful to herself, that David was jealous of her affection for Becky, though much too proud to say so.

"Would you believe it," she said one day, "that David got up suddenly and walked out of the room when I told him that you *envied* me my happiness, because you thought motherhood the most beautiful thing in the whole world? He actually said that women were indecent!"

"And so we are!" Becky had cried in a rage, and vowed that she would never never tell Féo anything again.

But if Becky and David never met, he often made opportunities by which he saw her, and one day she saw *him*. He was splashed and muddy, in the riding-dress that showed his straight limbs and symmetry to the best advantage, and as he never rode any but perfect cattle, horse and man made a perfect ensemble of grace and beauty as they paced slowly by her. His cap was pulled low over his brows. He was looking straight before him, wrapped profoundly in his own thoughts, and it struck Becky then that but for his riding, and having to travel by rail a considerable distance to and from the pack with which he hunted, he would be in danger of going mad during this endless month of waiting.

"My Sir Galahad," said Becky proudly to herself as she went her way in the mud, and indeed it was a knightly figure in its youthful self-restraint, and unconscious suggestion of pain bravely borne; and if Becky had only known it, he was at that very moment thinking of her, of how manfully she had shouldered her half of the burden, brought all her courage to meet the demand he had almost brutally laid on her at Lavenders.

For the meaning of her white face as she came and went to Féo was at last clear to him. He doubted no longer that she loved, and had always loved him. He had graduated in the school of love with a vengeance during the past year, and he had long ago passed that last supreme test of highest passion, love without the desire of possession.

CHAPTER XXV

"A mother is a mother yet,
The holiest thing alive."

JANE watched Becky anxiously during that time of waiting, knowing her to be strained to almost snapping-point; and David's looks, on the rare occasions when she saw him, pleased her even less. Those two worn young faces, that should have worn the nonchalance of youth, and been warm with the joy of living, made keener the tragedy of Féo's happiness, that babbled and sang to itself like a brook, as she moved unafraid and joyous to the appointed time that was to make her happier yet.

"Was it well that two lives had been sacrificed to make one happy?" Jane often asked herself. But Becky never wavered, never doubted. The right thing, the honourable thing, had been done. Any other way out of the *impasse* had never been even imaginable.

And Kelmersdale, watching from Paris, thinking that the domesticities were silently using their disintegrating forces against unlawful love, possessed his soul in patience, and also believed that his long intellectual companionship with her could not fail to have borne fruit, for the intellect nourishes the affections. "Who knows most loves most, and loving most, enjoys most." David the hunter

must show to her crude and unintelligent after those brighter wits to which she had got accustomed.

But Billy, who knew of those hopes, and who had at last thoroughly grasped the fact that a Bethune never changed, either in love or in hate, thought it was Kelmersdale who was unintelligent in supposing he could cure in Becky that rarest of all maladies in this nineteenth century—a one love woven enduringly into the warp and woof of her one life, though frankly neither Billy, nor Jane, nor Kelmersdale could see anything in the man himself to inspire it.

David was a fine sportsman, extremely good-looking, of clean life, but very masterful, very selfish, and utterly unable to understand that subtle, spiritual side of Becky that made her so interesting. And with her tremendous individuality the two wills were bound to clash, so that Féo was in many particulars infinitely better suited to him as a wife than Becky. It was because they were unattainable to each other that they loved so much, and thus made the disease incurable.

And if Becky were a sunbeam in Féo's presence, if her spirits had never been more unflagging, her powers of amusing others, and making them laugh more unrivalled, she yet longed fiercely for the ordeal to be over, and herself set free, and with a strange mixture of yearning and dread she thought of the little face, the little hands that must, that *would* inevitably draw David and Féo together.

Sometimes a feeling of terror came over her that things had gone too smoothly for Féo throughout, that she

was too sure of the future; Fate has a deceitful way of smiling at, and stabbing you in the same breath, and Lady Marchmont, too, was anxious, knowing the life-long delicacy of her daughter.

It was before breakfast on the last day of January, and a bright, clear morning, when a messenger came from Bruton Street, and to Becky's gasping question, "She is safe?" came the eagerly longed-for affirmative; also that Lady Moray was delighted to have a little daughter.

Becky shut herself in, and kneeled down, and thanked God . . . then suddenly a fierce passion of envy shook her like a reed, for before her eyes showed the lovely trinity of mother, father, and child . . . she had never wished to change personalities with any one in her life before, but now, to be Féo for this exquisite hour she would gladly have given long years of existence.

Later, there came a sinister knocking at the door, and fear gripped her, for there was hurry in the sound; thus does ill news ever travel, while good tidings tarries or is lost on the way.

Becky unbarred the door, but before she had taken the twisted note from David out of the woman's hand she knew that her cruel envy of Féo's exceeding happiness had been unnecessary.

"Féo insists on seeing you," wrote David, in an almost illegible scrawl, "but the nurse is anxious, and forbids it. You must decide."

In an agony of fear and self-upbraiding, Becky flew to Jane, and asked her advice.

Jane looked very grave, but at last said, "Go, and be

guided by what the doctor says—of course you will find him there—and I will follow."

But the doctor was not at Bruton Street. Only the subdued faces of the servants met Becky on her arrival, and not daring to ask a question, her knees trembled as she mounted the familiar stairs to Féo's room; somehow the very atmosphere was different, for Death and Life had fought together for Féo in that house since she left it overnight, and she put one hand against the lintel of the door to steady herself as she went in.

Féo was lying high among her pillows, radiant and excited; exhaustion had given way to fever, and her triumphant voice ringing shrilly out at sight of her, and the anxious movement forward of the nurse as if to bar the way, gave Becky a sudden inexplicable fear. She ran forward blindly, and as her arms closed round the young mother, and what she held in the crook of one arm, she became aware of David standing on the other side of the bed.

It was his boyishness of look that struck her first, then that his hair was rumpled, as though he had been up all night; but she found no triumph, no look of proud fatherhood *there*.

"Little one—darling," she said, with a sob in her voice, the sob that climbs in all true women's throats when they first see the sister who has come alive out of her anguish; and as Féo held up her transfigured face to be kissed, crooning, foolish words of love fell from Becky's shaking lips, and all the self-restraint of the last weeks fell from her. They were just two women clinging together, united by the divinity, the marvel of motherhood.

Féo very gently and proudly turned back the head-flannel Becky had embroidered, and showed the tiny, red face within, then with a beautiful gesture of love and happiness held out the little bundle to David, who took it awkwardly; on his face, and all unknown to himself, the look of half-shame, half-anger, that a man wears, when he looks on his first-born by the woman he does not love, in the presence of the woman whom he does. At Féo's request he stooped his head and kissed the child before he gave it back to her, and Becky's tenderer one followed, then the nurse, who looked grave, came forward and wanted to turn the visitors out, and Becky was willing to go, but Féo would not hear of it, and began to talk in that high excited voice which somehow made Becky cold with fear.

"Do you remember those lines?" she said,

> "'Sunrise was slanting o'er the city gates
> Rosy and beautiful . . .'

"they have been in my mind all the morning, for my little baby was born at daybreak, you know—rosy and beautiful—that is just what life is to me to-day . . . and I'm so happy . . . happy," the ethereal young face turned towards David as its sun and heaven, "I've been happy all the way along, and now—now I've got *her* as well as you two."

Suddenly she blanched, and fell back with closed eyes; the nurse flew to her, snatching up brandy, entreating David to fetch the doctor instantly, and he rushed from the room, stumbling over Jane and Lady Marchmont on the threshold.

. . . . . .

How long was it afterwards, hours few or many, night or morning, that Becky found herself clasping Féo's frail hand, trying to hold, to keep it, to never let it go, till the young mother had reached the other side of that Bridge upon which no two poor mortals may walk, side by side, together?

"And if he must go, let me go with him!" is ever the passionate cry of the human soul that sees the forlorn figure it loves, stepping out alone towards the invisible, a soldier, fallen out of line with his regiment, left behind while the rest march gaily on to cheerful beat of drum and fife, left beyond sound of the stirring bugle-call of life, for ever and ever . . . and this soldier was so young, so happy, and was marching through such a pleasant land.

Féo's slender fingers—and it was a mother's hand already, and wistful and protective in its touch—lay on David's head as he kneeled, his calm broken up, his face hidden beside her.

"God, was I good to her?" he was praying over and over again; "give her back to me, and I will be better—I have been as a brute beast, but I did not know."

In the background Cleopatterer was weeping hysterically, and Jane silently, but Becky saw nothing save Féo's true eyes that were looking very earnestly, almost with divination, into hers.

She was only a girl, but much experience had come to her, she had fulfilled herself, been wife to the man she loved, she had known the anguish and bliss of motherhood, and Becky was only a maiden, with all life's scroll unread, and for the first time Féo was the older and wiser of the two, as she whispered—

"You'll take care of my little baby . . . mother wouldn't love it as you will . . . I would like you to bring her up . . . and you'll be kind to *him* . . ." (she smoothed lovingly the waves of sunny hair of which she had always been so proud) "if—if ever"—she said, so faintly, wistfully, that Becky barely caught the words—"you feel that you could take care always of my poor boy, I would be so much happier . . . for there is no one like you, and him, in the whole world, the two I have loved best . . . and because you both . . . loved me. And you saved his life . . . I often thought he really belonged to you . . . if you quarrelled, my two brave hearts, you were good friends once . . . and you are stronger than I am, and could go with him on his hunting expeditions. He must go abroad as soon as possible. . . . Mother!" —and the weeping and wailing woman came up to Féo's side, and the girl kissed her, and begged her forgiveness if she had ever been unkind or neglectful of her.

"But you've got your husband now," she said, and then the distracted woman, becoming uncontrollable, was led out of the room; and Jane came, and said brave and heartening words without breaking down; then she, too, went away, and the three whose lives had so crossed, and mingled with one another, were left together till the end.

Two of them had been very clever, thought Becky fiercely, for Féo was to die happy, not knowing . . . she was not to have that divine torch in her heart, that light in her eyes, slowly extinguished by the pain and disillusion of time and change. She was not fated to lose her ideal, and for her the pendulum had never

swung back between satiety and passion; there had been no corrupting element in her love for David, no jealousy, no joys that breed decay, it had been rather the pure flame of love, and he might keep the memory of it, and of her, fragrant in his heart for ever, and be all the better and the stronger man for it.

Soon she sank into stupor, and David lifted his head, and looked long at the lovely young face in its white, triumphant calm, already so far remote from earthly things, and as he thought of all her love, and patience, all the sweetness of a purely unselfish nature that he had inly slighted because she was only Féo, he bowed his head upon her hands, and groaned aloud. That sound called her back, and she opened those beautiful brown eyes of devotion full on him, and smiled, as she had always done at sight of him.

"We have been very happy," she said; then, "I want my little baby" (for there was hurry), and, when it came, she kissed the tiny features again and again, and made David lay it on her breast. Then she drew Becky's face down to her, close, closer, and so they made farewell . . . then David, drawing the child and her up into his strong arms, laid his cheek to hers, and so for a little while they rested, till with a sigh of contentment, and holding up her sweet lips to David, as for a last good-night kiss, and clinging fast to Becky's hand as to a staff that supported her, with a strangely familiar gesture as one long used and loved, she nestled her forehead warm into his neck, and so slipped away.

CHAPTER XXVI

"I bow down to my root, and like a child
Yearn, as is likely, to my mother Earth
Upon whose bosom I shall cease to weep,
And on my mother's bosom fall asleep."

Two little feet in blue morocco shoes were firmly planted on Becky's knee; under a white frock her hand held, as in a cup, the little bare sweet body, one tiny hand pulled at the string of pearls about her throat, and the intensely blue eyes looked into hers, solemn and beautiful as very young children's eyes often are—eyes that seem just learning to comprehend earthly things, while yet they have not forgotten the great mystery whence they came.

Suddenly the delightful little pinafored figure scrambled down into her lap, a soft little arm stole round her neck, and the usual request came, "Tell me a 'tory."

But before Becky began it, and she had often to rack her brains for something new (while her accounts of David's prowess with wild beasts would have greatly astonished him, though it invested him with immense fascination in the child's eyes), she glanced across the table to see how the other of her two children present was getting on.

"Whom the gods love die young" . . . does this apply to those whose spirits are always young, even if

their bodies are old—or mean that those are beloved, who in old age become veritable children over again?

This last had been Mrs Bethune's lot, and she was now a sweet, old child, docile and loving, who had quietly slipped away truant to her happy childhood, and dwelled in it, speaking often of her mother and playmates; and between these two lives, the one just beginning, and the other just completing its perfect circle, Becky's time was almost entirely passed. All that her mother had done for her as a little child, Becky now did for her, but there was no ugliness of decay, never at any time of her life had Mrs. Bethune's face and disposition been sweeter than now; it was just a true and beautiful mind turning like a child's, not towards the farthing rushlight of life, but towards a glimmer of the widening, and ever widening glory of eternity.

And if Becky had been like others of us, who never really love those who love us, until too late—too late to tell them, too late to save ourselves from anguish unavailing, she felt an intense pleasure in being able to minister to what she loved; and most of us have the feeling that if we can get personally near to what we love in illness, we can ward off pain and death from them; that is why we suffer so acutely when we are out of touch with them.

The mistress of Lavenders, and the old ladies, and the young ones, too, were very good to the Missus in those days; it was not the "kindness by machinery" that Becky had once supposed, and for the most part she was happy, though now and then some word or allusion would un-

expectedly touch a secret spring, and plunge her into weeping, that was as quickly over as a child's April passion of smiles and tears.

Becky went round now, and threaded her mother's needle, the needle that made such aimless and laborious stitches on a long strip of linen, but with which Mrs. Bethune was as satisfied as when she had been one of the finest needlewomen in the world.

Becky dropped a kiss on the silken grey hair, murmured a loving word, then, taking little Féo in her arms, who lay

> "With no weapon but a wanton curl
> Idly reposing on a silver breast,"

sat down by the fireside to tell her story.

She had very early in the day found that "Fee-fi-fo-fum, I'll gr-r-ind your bones to make my bread," was always understood by the very smallest persons of even the most limited intelligence, for every tiny child has seen a saucepan in its nursery, and can appreciate the terrible position of Jack when he is popped into one by the Ogress, inconveniently near the fire, and little Féo would shudder (for Becky had a graphic touch), and Jack's headlong escape down the beanstalk pursued by the furious Ogre would usually be accompanied by gasping little cries of dismay and pleasure.

The older child at the table listened attentively, then, a little jealous, and anxious for her share of attention, announced in her slightly indistinct voice, that she would give them a recitation, at which little Féo clapped her hands. The two were great friends, and understood

each other very well indeed, and when the dear old lady had faultlessly recited the little poem that ends—

> "And yet they felt, they knew not why
> More glad than they had done before,"

the tears sprang into Becky's eyes. To have forgotten everything else, to believe the dead were the living, and the living dead, but to remember perfectly the verses she had taught her children at her knee, what heart-nerve, woven into memory, had made them thus survive all joy and sorrow?

"More," cried out little Féo, "more!" but her old playmate suddenly laid down her needle, and announced that she was going to take a cab immediately, and go to see her mama.

Becky at once fell in with her mood, and said she should be dressed directly, and little Féo had often seen this game before, and entered thoroughly into the spirit of it. As her mother had once fitted the gloves on her tiny fingers, so now Becky carefully fitted on hers, tied a handkerchief over her head for bonnet, put a shawl round her for cloak, and lastly brought her purse, about which Mrs. Bethune was always very particular.

"I haven't a *farthing* in it," she said anxiously, but Becky showed her the gold and silver inside, and then drawing her skirts together, and trying to rise, the older of Becky's two children announced herself as dressed, and *quite* ready for departure.

But Becky pleaded that it was cold, and late, and dark, and much more cheery here by the fire, and they would go

to-morrow instead, and at first hard to pacify (indeed she told Becky that her interference was perfectly *ridiculous*), her mother at last said complacently—

"Yes, that will be the best way; we will take the very first train in the morning."

She took one of Becky's hands, drew it slowly up to her mouth, and kissed it devoutly, solemnly even, as if going through a sacrament, as indeed it was, of love.

The only trouble with the docile, sweet soul was, that she must for ever be taking a journey, and always to see those who had been in their graves many a long year, and she was permitting herself to be divested of her supposed outdoor garments, when the door opened, and Jane Pomeroy came in, as she usually did during what Becky always called the children's hour, and in which they had the dining-room all to themselves and their games.

For Jane, finding that Becky would not forsake her duty at Lavenders, and come to her, often came to Becky, and, indeed, took very kindly to the life there, behaving as if she had never dined without texts for table-salt in her life, and even bidding fair to fall into the universal error that it is repentance that makes some folks religious, and not old age. Jane sometimes felt that the supporting qualities of religion at Lavenders almost replaced Quekett, and this would make Becky laugh and sigh alternately, for she could not feel like that herself, and had always a horror of hedging.

Jane came up to the table with her work-bag, kissed Mrs. Bethune with lingering and especial tenderness, and praised her needlework, at which the dear old lady

beamed all over, and, as if Jane's presence were an unexpected and delightful pleasure, said—

"This *is* a treat!"

One day, before Mrs. Bethune's mind had quite gone, she asked Jane anxiously if she thought God would forgive her her sins? "For I have been a great sinner," earnestly said the sweet old child, who had never committed a sin in her life.

Jane thought awhile, then said, "If one of your children did something wrong, would you forgive him?"

"Of *course* I should!" said the Missus quite indignantly, and with a flash of her old spirit.

"Well—it's just the same; God will forgive *you*," said Jane, to the other's intense comfort, who rested henceforth in peace on the Divine will; for with the weakening mind, the barriers of Mary Bethune's intense reserve of character had fallen, and the full treasure of her love flowed out to Becky, and those around her, and the beauty of her nature was made visible. Is it because the quivering mother's heart fears to place itself at the mercy of selfish and careless children's hands that often it loves unsuspected and silently, and was it not much more difficult for the mothers of the last generation to make comrades of their sons and daughters than do the parents of this?

"I never understood Mary till now," said Jane, and wiped a tear away; for when not happy in a child's way, those poor dying eyes, in which all the wounds of a long lifetime showed, would wring her heart for love and pity, the pains of life had so much outweighed the pleasures with this mother of many children.

Jane Pomeroy had always pitied the poor soul, always thanked Heaven she had no children to love her, and wring her heart. It is such a one-sided business, motherhood, at the best, and the risks and troubles are so very certain, the prizes so very few and far between, and Heaven covets these, and mostly makes them its own.

To-night, looking at Jane very earnestly, she said: "I should like one day more of life; do you think I might have it if I prayed for it? It will be *so* hard to say good-bye; I wonder what will be the last words I shall say to you?"

"Of course you may have another day," said Jane tenderly, "lots of days, and you are not going to say good-bye to us for a long time yet."

Quite reassured, Mrs. Bethune went on with her cobble, and Jane looked across at Becky, who sat with David's two-year-old little daughter curled up in her lap, a young, happy-faced Madonna with her girl child—the intense mother-heart of her making this baby, that she had once so bitterly and jealously envied Féo, dear to her as her own flesh and blood.

"Bed-time," said Jane, who was herself decidedly jealous of Becky's absorption in her new treasure, and very unwillingly the little girl lifted her head from Becky's warm shoulder, and frowning, revealed an unsuspected resemblance to her father. Otherwise, but with blue instead of brown eyes, she was a startling and most beautiful miniature of her mother.

"Prayers," said Becky, and the child kneeled up in her lap, and with tightly shut eyes made her usual simple

petitions, afterwards repeating the special prayer she had been taught to put up for the brave soldiers then fighting the Boers in South Africa.

"Please God, send my daddy, who is a wonderful man, and all our poor sojer boys safe 'ome. And if He *don't*—" she abruptly concluded with a dark baby scowl; but the dark threat of vengeance upon the Almighty was too terrific to be formulated, and Becky hid her convulsed face on the little heaving bosom that contained so fiercely truculent a spirit.

"How like David she was then," said Becky, as the stern face relaxed, and the child trotted off to the biscuit-tin on the sideboard, out of which she was treated every night before she went to bed.

Her nurse appeared at the moment, but Becky did not as usual go up to the nursery. She had seen signs of depression in Jane ever since the second post with the London papers was in, and when her mother's attendant came, and one on either side they had supported her upstairs, the girl came back, and sat down in the warm, pleasant room by Jane's side, with a wild hope that there was news of David, of whom they had had no tidings for months. But Jane's thoughts just then were with Mary, and incidentally of herself.

"Have you ever known," she said to Becky, "what it is—the relief of being snatched out of an acute mental and spiritual agony, to find yourself helpless—in other people's hands—in the grip of a physical pain that relieves you of any further struggle or duty? The quiet room—the nurse's face—we thought to wake in hell, or

in lonely torture by the wayside—we think it is a dream, but it is not—we stretch our limbs, and fear to stretch them further; but at last we feel we are delivered—and from a damned soul we pass into a blessed. But, of course, you have never been really ill."

"No; but I have often *longed* for a real illness, it would be such a rest. The hurt you can lay your finger on, and try to cure, is nothing to a torture of nerves and heart that literally leaves no trace."

"Yes. But, my dear, I pray God that when I go, I go whole—not a dead soul in a live body, or a dead body and a live brain, but all of one piece; otherwise we need to be delivered into a very gentle and generous hand, and if we are able, should thank God passionately for it. For death, when we are long a-dying, gives pause to the onlooker, affects his temper, and strangers and hired folk take but an impersonal interest in one, therefore make *one* friend to see you through a ghastly business, that only to the fortunate is over quickly. I've left instructions to be cremated, it's clean—the only danger is, that if your ashes are in an urn, you might be taken as a pinch of snuff some day by some guileless person, and immediately transmit to them your worst qualities, which would be dreadful."

Becky laughed.

"You'll never grow old, Auntie, and the lamp of your intelligence will never go out. It's fed by enthusiasm within; but the merely sensual, who have exercised no power of mind over matter, have the fruit of their lives inscribed on the painted, the powdered, the massaged

face, and which falls into a wrinkled old age just as the soul is wrinkled inside, and no blessed second youth can come to it. You must be good company to yourself all the way along, and in yourself have found something richer and more satisfying than you have found in other people, if your face is to give others pleasure even to the brink of the grave."

For a while there was silence, and Jane worked, while Becky looked into the fire; both were thinking of David, now two years absent. And in the burning coals Becky saw him as he had looked after Féo died, when he had been shamed through and through in his manhood by his failure to Féo—Féo who had given all, he nothing; who in death, as in life, had set herself entirely aside that he might be happy; who had even given his heart's desire at the moment when, so overpowering was his remorse, he would at a word from her have given his sacred promise never to look at another woman all his life.

Becky always quailed, and drew in her breath hard, when she thought of that moment when David laid his wife's body down with their living child in her arms, and looking on her face, knew that he could never make it up to her, never cancel his great debt of love, while a thousand instances of neglect and coldness towards her rushed over him, and merely as a sportsman, knew that he had acted unfairly and cruelly to a gentle creature whose only sin had been that she loved him.

He gave to her scarcely-cold lips then, such kisses as he had denied to her in life, he sought to warm that

frail body on his breast as if his own intense longing to bring her back must reanimate her; and never had the girl's sweet face looked more exquisite and lovable than when, half shrouded in its veil of bright hair, it drooped upon his shoulder, as if even in death it besought him not to remove her from that beloved haven. . And that dying gesture of Féo's had been a revelation to Becky of how near the wife stood, how far away was the stranger woman from the man they both loved.

Becky had taken that lifeless shape out of his arms at last, and led him from the room, and she had stayed beside him, a devoted comrade, soothing him, tending him, until he was partly sane, until he had laid his head on her shoulder, and oh ! awful sight, he had wept, and in those tears of blood washed some of his agony away, and then she had seen him no more till days after the earth had taken Féo, that fair human lily, to its breast, and he had come to her to say farewell before leaving for Africa.

She could not remember how they had said it . . . at first they had been calm and grave, discussing arrangements about the child, already placed in Becky's charge by the mother, and he had consented for her to live at Lavenders for the present, and then he had spoken of his own future, and Becky had approved of his return to Africa for an indefinite time, and the unspoken thought was between them, that he hoped he would never return. Then there had been some desultory talk between them, and at last the moment had come for him to leave her. White and trembling, at the final moment they chanced to look into each other's eyes. . . .

"Oh then like those who clinch their nerves to rush
Upon their dissolution, they two rose,
There—closing like an individual life
In one blind cry of passion and of pain,
Like bitter accusation ev'n to death,
Caught up the whole of love and uttered it,
And bade adieu for ever."

She pulled herself together, but unable to speak of David, asked if there were any good war news? At Lavenders no one ever even thought of a paper, so Jane had hers sent down twice a day from town.

Jane shook her head sadly; it was that black-letter day when the full list had been returned of the casualties at Spion Kop. The fortune of war had gone cruelly against us of late, and for a while Becky and Jane conversed sadly enough on the topic that just then engrossed the attention of the whole world.

"Lucilla Beauclerk sent for me the other day," said Jane, "broken-hearted because her only boy, Archie, is ordered to the front. You know how particular he is about his shooting, and racing, and other get-ups—a really smart boy's vanities are even more extensive than a girl's. Well, there they all were, in a big heap, his man packing them away for an indefinite time, and Silly—I mean Lucy—sitting in the midst of them crying. 'I call it just grand,' I said, 'all the clothes, amusements, sports, everything thrown aside to step out a *man* with thirty-seven pounds of baggage. He has but amused himself with follies, and leaves them without regret.'

"'And all my love,' cries Lucy, 'will only give him

a sleeping bag, some flannel shirts, six pairs of socks, and a filter!'

"'You gave him a good constitution, my dear, and the fewer socks the better—he'd have to wash 'em. I'm told the Tommies love to see their Colonel delicately wringing out his shirt at arm's length!'

"'The Boers will take the ring I gave him from his finger, and the socks and boots from his feet; they marched our men barefooted to Pretoria,' snivels Lucy.

"'Let them,' I said. 'The Boers can't take his honour, anyway, or his lion heart, and we shall march *them* to Pretoria, not they us. Look here, Lucy, I never wanted to be a mother till to-day—to have a son to send to fight for his country, and be proud of him. Why talk of sympathy when the boy is doing what he wants—and his duty as well? Shut yourself up, and howl if you like—but smile in public, and to Archie—or he will blush for you.'"

"Bravo, old Jane!" cried Becky, and hugged her.

"I said, 'If you look at it in its proper light, I don't think it is so hard to bear. Duty comes first in the Army, everything else nowhere, and Archie's place is with his regiment, to take his share of work and danger. Mothers and wives have to stand on one side, and see things go. If you *have* to lose him, you won't be the first who has given her best beloved for her country.'"

"But the boy is so young—most of the killed are so young," cried Becky. "And life is a lovely thing"—she herself had indeed a passion for it.

"Yes. But there's far too much fuss about the waste

of life—think of the Crimea, and our losses there. And far too much talk of sympathy with parents, and 'the boy's black handkerchief lies on the strand' business. 'I tell you, Lucy,' I said, 'that those who want pity are those with boys who don't *want* to fight—not those who do. Would you like a coward for a son who funked fighting, like the Boer 'lion' who hid in an ambulance during a battle the other day? You agreed to Archie going into the army?' 'Yes,' says Lucy, 'he was so keen on it, I gave way.'

"'A boy has a right to choose his profession,' I said; 'it's the only thing he *can* choose—he certainly doesn't his parents.' Just then in rushes Archie, in wild spirits.

"'Hullo, Archie, V.C.!' I said.

"'Not for me,' cries Archie, flaring up; 'I'm not taking any, thanks. If some fellow would refuse it on the ground that he had done no more than his duty—except, of course, in isolated and extraordinary circumstances—it would be a good thing. Wouldn't any chap cut in, and rescue a pal, or lug off a wounded one? To reward one for bravery, slurs the rest as cowards, and we have no cowards in our army. Of course I'm delighted to go; it would be a disgrace to our regiment afterwards if we had been out of this row.'

"Then he stoops, and turns a key on all his little secrets and letters, and I knew Lucy was thinking, who would unlock that box, where would those keys go?

"'Every chap I know is out there,' said Archie. 'South Africa now is Bond Street and Piccadilly—you meet a pal at every step. When I come home'—and so

he rattled away, and Lucy wiped her eyes, and really was quite plucky after that.

"Well, my dear, as you would have expressed it, I bucked her up—put the right spirit into her, and she kept it up to the last; not a tear fell on his face at parting, and I know the boy was proud of her. After all, the great things of life are done quietly; it's the little things we holloa about."

"Walter must be very bad not to be in the thick of it," said Becky, and Jane knew that it was of David she was thinking; "he and Billy used to talk for hours about the Boers, and their 'slim' tricks; Walter loathed them."

"The tide of war has gone nowhere near Damaraland," said Jane absent-mindedly, "and if Walter has not gone, we may be sure David has not either."

She frowned as she spoke; David was carrying his mourning too far, a couple of years was an unreasonable time for a free man to stay away from the only woman in the world he had ever loved, and she feared he was up at the front. Féo had reaped her harvest of happiness; was death to cheat Becky of hers?

"I think Walter is really ill," said Jane, rousing herself. "Africa is a cruel courtesan, who treats all those who love her in the same way; she takes their best, then sends them home to die. You remember David wrote me that your brother was ill with fever, but took no notice, no remedies, and was going off on an even more dangerous expedition than the one in which he found the guano? It was utter madness in the boy's state of health,

David thought; his preparations against the desert, just a gun and some cartridges, and a couple of devoted Hottentots, who would follow him blindfold to death."

"Yes; they are so fond of him," said Becky, "that sometimes he is called the King of the Hottentots; but he is as hard as nails, Auntie, and I don't think it is the fever so much that has knocked him out, but that he never got over the loss of his Tolly and his child, for of course the mother kept it," said Becky, still absently —"that guano has been a curse to him; of what use is money really? Does it help him—did it help poor Féo?"

"Don't say poor Féo," exclaimed Jane, "the hour in which she ceased to be, was the happiest of a singularly happy life, that even her beauty and wealth could not spoil. It is true that David's courtship lingered—it is always against the romance, or let us call it the shyness, that is in every man's heart, when he and the girl he is expected to marry are brought up together, as she and David were. He gets too much used to her; she is content, but he likes change, variety, and all men are at heart wanderers. After David got that fever of Africa into his blood, he has seemed unfit for any other life. But, after all, she got her heart's desire, and she must inevitably have died later of consumption, and might have suffered much."

"What?" exclaimed Becky, turning pale; "I knew that she was delicate, but nothing more."

"Her father died of it at forty; she might have lived longer in that marvellous African climate, but I doubt it."

"Did David know that?"

"I fancy not, and Féo did not know it herself."

"But the child!" cried Becky, in anguish; "my little darling! what of her?"

"May inherit David's constitution. Consumption frequently slips a generation."

But Becky was disturbed and unhappy. Here was a fresh burden she was called upon to bear, and she began to think that if the Lord chastened only those whom He loved, the Lord was mighty fond of her.

She shook herself rebelliously, and exclaimed—

"Auntie, if something doesn't happen, if it is always to be all work and no play, this Jack will be the dullest boy that ever lived. Did I *really* ever frivol, wear an evening gown, and set David Moray's teeth on edge by the outrageous things I said? I would like to be mad again, just for a little while, so as not to forget the way, then come back here and be good! But once you begin to run smoothly in the groove of misfortune, it is next to impossible to get out of it."

She got up, and moved restlessly about; she tried so hard not to think, not to remember . . . but all the hot youth was not crushed out of her yet.

"My child," said Jane sadly, "don't you think it is rather petty of any one of us to think solely of his own affairs, while our poor fellows are fighting for us out yonder on a Spratts' dog-biscuit, and muddy water?"

CHAPTER XXVII

"Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave, and let me lie.
Glad did I live, and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

Good and bad news came together to Lavenders one bustling February morning, in a letter from David, and a packet addressed to Mrs. Bethune returned from the Dead Letter Office, after wandering about for months.

Jane opened the latter first, and not by mistake; she was glad afterwards that it had fallen into her hands and not Becky's, and her face was sad as she read the closely-written sheets that by merest accident had arrived at all. She wiped the tears away to read David's letter, and a warm thrill of joy ran through her, for he was not at the front, and told her why. He said that he had risked his life needlessly for a year and a half (indeed, the fact of a man penetrating alone to the heart of Africa without any European companion, and whose bag included the elephant, rhinoceros, and lion, had attracted much attention); but suddenly discovering that it was precious, he had decided to trifle with it no more, and in his letter was a message to Becky.

Becky came suddenly upon Jane as she sat alone, and at sight of her face, suddenly the room went dark to the girl, and she cried out—

"David has *gone*, instead of coming home?"

At that thin, despairing cry Jane said very gently—

"No, it is Walter."

"Oh! mother! mother!" cried Becky, looking towards an empty chair, "thank God, thank God that now you will never know!"

"It was last summer," said Jane. "David was at the settlement when Walter started on his last 'walk,' then he went into the interior on a hunting expedition, and when he looked in at Cape Cross a month ago, he was met with the news of Walter's death. The Boss said he had cabled and written to England; the cable never reached me, but, strangely enough, his letter addressed to Hill Street, and wandering about the country till returned to the Dead Letter Office, came by the same post as David's. It was addressed to your mother, but fearing bad news, I opened it. Enclosed is a letter from a friend of his, and also an account of Walter's last journey and death. In Scriptural beauty of language and simple dignity, my dear, I have never read anything to equal the letter jointly written by those two poor Hottentots. Our best authors might study their mode of expression with advantage to themselves."

"Give me them," said Becky, and by now the tears were streaming down her cheeks. So this was the end of the poor pioneer who had found a fortune for another man, and lost his own life, and his wife and child into the bargain.

Jane put the letters into the girl's hand, then sighed, for this was one tragedy the more in that most unlucky family, and yet she had reason for gladness.

For it was the turn of the year, when even the most despairing among us, permit ourselves to hope for a fortunate turn in the fortunes of those we love best; and in spite of all, she dared to hope for Becky, who thoroughly deserved to be happy . . . it was Becky's life, its brightness, or its eclipse, with which Jane most concerned herself.

"CAPE CROSS, *July* 28, 1899.

"TO MRS. BETHUNE,
"200 Hill Street, Berkeley Square.

"DEAR MADAM,—I trust you will accept my heartfelt sympathy on the sad death of your son Walter, of which you will have been already informed by cable. Enclosed you will find the statement of the natives who accompanied him; I have translated it as I had it from them. There can be no doubt that these men attended him most faithfully throughout his illness, and that his body was interred as decently and as respectfully as was possible under the circumstances. On this point I questioned the natives closely, and I think you may be perfectly satisfied.

"There can also be no doubt that the cause of death was malarial fever, acting on a frame already weakened by privation.

"Together with the statement of the natives, I send you a portion of a somewhat worn map, with the course your son took marked in black ink. It may prove of interest to you and yours.

"There has been some amount of conjecture here as to whether your son's remains would be removed to some place such as Cape Cross or Walfisch Bay, that of course rests with you and his family. But I would say, in God's name, let him rest in peace in his lonely grave, it is the grave of a pioneer, and he himself would not have desired any other.

"Trusting you will convey the expression of my sympathy to the members of your family,—I am, dear madam, yours very sincerely, J. SMITH."

Statement of the Natives who accompanied Mr. Walter Bethune on his last journey.

"CAPE CROSS, *July* 19, 1899.

"On the 15th of April 1899, we—that is, Mr. Bethune and we three Hottentot servants—left Cape Cross for Otiep with two pack donkeys and two guns, one shot and one Martini, and a fair supply of ammunition.

"The Baas (Mr. Bethune) was very weak when we started, and we were three days on the desert flat before reaching Otiep, where the first water is. This journey ought, under ordinary circumstances, to be performed easily in eighteen hours by men on foot. Before the journey was half completed, our water ran short, and the Baas became very weak, for you must know that the sun was scorching hot, and there is no shade in the desert, so I, Klaas, who am an old servant of the Baas', sent the other two boys on to the water, so that when they got

there they might return with a supply for both of us, and I remained with the Baas, to assist him to struggle along as he felt inclined. When the two boys reached the water, they at once despatched a Damara with water for us, and this man we met when our need was very great. The water refreshed the Baas immensely, and we continued the journey, but very slowly. However, some distance further along, we were met by a boy with two saddle horses sent by Mr. Gibbon, who had arrived at Otiep from another direction, and who, on hearing the state of affairs, despatched the horse he had been riding, to bring Mr. Bethune to Otiep.

"We remained for two weeks at Otiep, and our Baas improved greatly in health, for he was able to obtain a little milk every day from the natives' dwelling there. From Otiep we continued up the Omoruru river as far as Aggas with our scanty provisions, consisting of biscuit, tea, and coffee, and our blankets and ammunition packed on four donkeys.

"At Aggas we left the river, and struck across the great flat, intending to journey down the Um'at river to its mouth as soon as we struck it. When we struck the Um'at we did not recognise it as such, and travelled on to Tesfontein, which is some hundred miles further to the north. When we reached the native village of Tesfontein, we learned that we had passed the Um'at, and after remaining there but one day, we returned again until we struck the river, and we continued down its bed to the mouth and to the sea. As we came across the flats from Aggas to Tesfontein, our Baas shot two spring buck, and

one of us shot a gem-bok, and this meat we dried in the sun, and still had a fair supply when we reached Tesfontein. Here our Baas gave away most of the meat to the chief of the place, and on his offering him a fat goat in return, would not accept of it, saying that we had guns and ammunition with which to kill game, which these poor people had not.

"(It was the way with the master always to think more of others than himself.)

"After leaving Tesfontein our provisions ran short, and we could find no game, so we suffered much from hunger, and eked out a subsistence by eating the wild berries, until at last we were compelled to kill one of our pack donkeys for food.

"When we reached the mouth of the river Um'at very late one night, we were very thirsty and tired, but our Baas found the water for us, and we drank greedily; on the next morning the master took the rifle, and ascending the sand dunes saw a spring-bok, which he shot—the meat was very welcome to us all.

"I noticed here for the first time that the master looked very ill, and I became afraid for him.

"Here at the mouth of Um'at we remained for a day, and the east wind, the Sirocco, was terrible, blowing the sand about in clouds, and scorching the moisture out of our bodies like the blast of a furnace.

"Then the Baas came to me, and said, 'Klaas, shall we struggle on, and find what we came to find,' I replied, 'No! my Baas, you are very sick, and we have no provisions, let us go back, and when you get strong and well

again, we will return, and then you will find that which you have set your heart upon.'

"My master listened to what I said, and saw that it was good. He was sorely reluctant to turn back, for he was a brave man, but at last he consented, and we returned for one and a half days' journey up the Um'at, but my poor master became so weak that he could walk no more, and we laid him down in the shade of a tree, and soon he became delirious, and spoke strange things, from time to time crying out with a great cry. When my Baas became so ill, I sent San (one of us) back for help, imploring him to go as quickly as possible.

"So we two—that is, I, Klaas, and this man Fredric—remained with the Baas, listening to his strange sayings, and administering to his wants as far as possible; water was a half day's journey from where the Baas lay, but we never let him want for any. We plucked berries for him, but he would not eat; we made for him soup of the dried meat, but he would not drink; we made him tea (having a little left), and this he liked, and would sometimes sign for it.

"He spoke much of his brother, and of the guns he had sent him, and of Dr. Smith. One day his mind cleared a little, and he asked me, 'Klaas,' if I had sent for help. I told him I had, and that I hoped it would soon arrive. But he said he had not much hope of that, he thought the horses had been taken from Cape Cross on the hunting trip. But he hoped the doctor would get a horse and come.

"Four days after San had left, my poor Baas died,

talking to the last of his brother, and the doctor, and of others too, but I will not repeat what he said of these. He died on Friday at noon, and on the following day, we two buried him on the left hand side of the Um'at as you face the sea. We wrapped his body carefully in two blankets, and secured the grave against wild animals. We placed a wooden cross at the head of the grave, and another some distance further along on the bank of the river. We also remained for some days to watch the grave, and then turned our steps towards Cape Cross, which we reached on the 19th July 1899.

(Signed) "KLAAS X his mark.
"FREDRIC X his mark."

Becky with dim eyes laid the papers down, and there came suddenly to her mind those lines about another boy who had left his home with a heart as bounding as Walter's—

"But what recks it now, is his sleep less sound
In the place where the wild winds swept him,
Than if Home's green turf his grave had bound
And the friends that he loved had wept him?"

"It was the death that he would have chosen," she said softly, "the desert was his home, and he lies in the desert, he will be one and a part of it for ever."

Upstairs his "glorious old mother" was babbling happily of the pink frock in which she had gone to her first ball.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"Come, fill the cup, and in the fire of Spring
Your winter garment of Repentance fling."

EARLY spring was coming up, and however the winds might bluster and deny it, you knew she was there, by her breath of green passing between the black sticks of the trees, though not apparently touching them, like the spirit of hope made manifest, "like our lives, and the dry bones of fact," thought Becky, but still, in spite of all our experience, our hearts steal out also with the green, and though we know we are fools, we are ready to begin it all over again, and be disappointed again, we are willing to endure *anything*, just to be alive!

And to the closelier folded buds in the hedges, she whispered—

"Shout!
Hang all your leafy banners out!"

and her heart awoke with the season, and she listened closely with ear inclined to the message that Nature was sending abroad to her human children.

And the great mother said, "I, too, have buried my dead, I also have endured the snows, the rigours of winter, but shortly I shall come with leaf and bird, and bee and blossom, and I will not look back and *remember*, but pass on to enjoy the full feast to which my long travail and endurance have given me a right."

Yes, it was spring, the old life threshed out and done with; the new one *here*, and man forgets . . . through the land the girl seemed to hear a voice calling, "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away, for lo! the winter is past, . . . the vines with the tender grapes give a good smell. . . ."

"*Tell Becky I am coming home.*" That had been David's message to her, delivered by Jane only a week or two before he was due in England, and what did that message mean, but that he was coming home to *her?*

And even as the chestnut tree, that all the winter months had looked sadly at its skeleton self in the pool, and now but faintly touched with the promise of spring, would later on assume its splendid summer suit of green, and rose, and ivory, so to Becky might the day be coming, the dark night passing away, the old-world miracle of the re-creation of joy to be worked in her heart, as in the teeming, blossoming earth.

Omar's mournful words recurred to her—

> "Yet ah! that Spring should vanish with the Rose!
> That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close!"

Yes, it *was* sweet scented, . . . and it was opening instead of closing; . . . it should never shut from fault of hers, . . . and all her thoughts were lovely as she walked in the garden; and since it is always through the special circumstances of the moment, rose-coloured or blue, that we behold Nature, she found beauty where there was none, and full spring where only the most meagre promise of it was yet in evidence.

For David was coming, was coming! Any moment he might be here now, and he was coming to her.

And he would be royally welcome. Unhesitatingly the girl took her great happiness in her hands, and thanked God for it, and prayed to be made worthy of it, and looked forward to a clean, outdoor existence with the man she loved, and who brought to her not the lees of life, but the beauty and freshness of an unimpaired manhood, and a heart that had not frittered away all its strength till it was incapable of a real, enduring passion.

Yes, the bridegroom was coming, and the bride had put on a blue gown in which to greet him, . . . something had wakened her early that morning, and said, "He is close at hand;" and at breakfast a pencilled note in David's handwriting was brought to her, and she had come out here to meet him, here where they had parted in such bitterness and sorrow, where in spirit she had often given to him those kisses that once she had denied him; and perhaps those moments of waiting were the most exquisite in her life.

. . . . . .

He came silently over the grass, bareheaded, all spring in his splendid youth, and love, and freshness; but when close to the log where Becky sat with head averted, a sudden fear seized him lest he had left a sinner, and found a saint, for he wanted no sweet consoler of age, no pseudo-mother to his child; saints were not in his line, and Jane Pomeroy's account of Becky's conduct during the past three years had alarmed him—Becky without a touch of the devil in her, would not be the Becky that he loved at all.

Suddenly she spoke, and reassured him.

"I'm rather fed up on being good," she said; "it's stodgy—worse, it makes you dowdy. There's nothing like

an admirer for keeping you up to the mark," and she tossed a proud head at the thought of her late deserted condition, soon to be mended, and at that moment looked extremely like the ungodly town Becky of free and unfettered speech, full of fire and life, who had driven all the men mad by showing how bad and capricious she could be; for if battalions of good men have killed themselves for the love of bad women, we never hear of even a bad man doing it for the sake of a good one.

"And I miss Hew," she went on, and her sentiments were so refreshing that, in spite of his impatience, David waited for more; "a woman feels so much more important when she says 'I won't,' than when she says 'I will,' and *looks* so much nicer saying it too! Becky, you're a fool!" and her tone changed abruptly, "a silly, sentimental idiot; I shouldn't wonder if you tried to climb a tree next, and built a nest in it—really such frivolity at your time of life is most unsuitable! How do you know that it is not as guardian to little Féo that he wants to see you, and not for yourself?"

Suddenly he laughed and stood before her, and she sprang up, crying out—

"David! *David!*" and with that involuntary cry of intensest love they were in each other's arms . . . in that intoxication of body and spirit, was it not natural that they should forget? The broken-hearted man by Féo's bedside, the girl whose life had been pure duty for two whole years—what were they now, but passionate man and woman, all but each other clean blotted out of sight?

David's arms tightened round her like bonds of steel,

they would hold her fast, would never let go of that tormenting, intensely human Becky, who had taught him love and pain; and the world might be out of joint, but with them all was *well*—for the real heart of life, its essence, its meaning, was made clear to them then, and all their quarrel with it, its futility and its cruelty, was done.

And she gave herself up to that joy, the girl had found her master at last, and rejoiced in yielding to him. Thus the troubled tale of their love came, not to its end, but its real beginning . . . they had meant to say so much to each other, heroics, and the rest of it, and they both said just nothing at all. . . .

Presently he sat down with her on the log; and they leaned their heads together, the strong natures had ceased to fight, their hearts were at rest, and the first words they spoke were of Féo.

"I wonder," he said, and looked up at the clear blue of the sky, "if she knows?"

"I'm sure she does. And I'll never be half as good and sweet to you as she was."

"So long as you don't flirt," he said, and held her away from him to look at her with jealous eyes; "no Billys or Kelmersdales mind, after we are married, and all your wickedness is to be kept strictly for home consumption."

"It will be very dull," said Becky, with conviction, "and awfully risky! Why should we be any luckier than other people?"

"Because it would be quite impossible to have one dull moment with you," he said, just as Hew had done.

"Isn't it odd?" said Becky musingly, "a girl looks at

a man, and she says, 'That is selfishness, and that is temper, and that is vice; and I don't like this trait, and the other irritates me'; it is because her heart is cold, and turns even men's virtues into faults. But one day the sun shines warm—the right man has come, and his dear face shows clear, and all the rest is mist—all his faults, and limitations, and mistakes."

Becky, suddenly silenced, presently remarked that man was an unreasonable beast, and never knew when to stop once he got something he liked. And David liked her deliciously soft cheeks and lips very much indeed, declaring that the vivid rose, and blue, and white comprised in one little space made him long to eat her.

"But we must get up a quarrel now and then, just to keep ourselves alive," said Becky. "Alas, that the cure of love should be matrimony! And I warn you that if you snore of evenings I shall divorce you, as a woman in America did *her* husband."

"Thank God I find you no saint," remarked David; and when she hid her face on his shoulder, he feared she wept but discovered her laughing.

"I was thinking," she said, "that we—we must not get into a—a rage together—or we—we shall be like the Kilkenny cats, not a bit left of either of us!"

David laughed, and hoped she would always keep her merry heart, no matter what happened, and so continue to be the cheery companion he had always found her.

"Any fool can be tragic," said Becky, "and it's *so* cowardly!"

And thinking of the texts, the remoteness from life

of this quiet place, David took shame to himself as he thought of the pluck necessary to live down a great sorrow in it. Had he not recklessly flung himself during the greater part of the past two years into every danger and peril that promised the speedy loss of a commodity upon which he set no earthly value?

"And you *did* love me, Becky?" he exclaimed.

"Always! All the time! But sometimes — during this last year, I have said to myself, if David thought me a bad lot, he would have gone down into hell after me —now that I'm good and domestic, he neither writes nor comes near me!"

"Well now, I have come to stay," he said, and when Becky declared she could not leave her mother, David replied that he had thought of that.

"I've had about enough of Africa for the present—one doesn't hunt game in a slaughter-house."

He paused. Both were thinking of Walter, and of the countless tragedies brought about by the war, and both remained silent, unwilling to spoil this first hour of happiness by sorrowful speech.

"The landlord of the 'Dragon' told me last night there is a good house close by here, to let furnished, and I think I could run to it; all poor Féo's money," and his face suddenly sobered, "goes to the child, of course, and my father will have to look out for himself."

"Don't you want to see your little girl?" she said rather shyly.

"I'm quite satisfied with this one," said David.

"Towards whom you have duties," went on Becky.

"Delicious duties!" said David; "and you'll always find me most assiduous in performing them, I assure you."

"Then you had better go in to the nursery," said Becky, trying to unlock his fingers, and thinking of Jane's remark, that there is so much, so very much, in the way a man puts his arm round your waist.

But I fear his love for Becky was better developed than his love as a father, and no man can do two things properly at one and the same time, and for all answer, and almost roughly, he lifted her arms, and clasped them close about his neck.

"Kiss me, Becky," he said, for his prejudices against kissing were all gone, though when Becky meekly told him she thought he had improved in the art, he gave her so many illustrations of it, that she rebelled, and insisted on talking horses.

"Cora Leveson has a couple of hunters to sell, and there are two capital packs close by," she said, and David listened with keen interest, and showed himself as good a sportsman as ever.

"I suppose you will put up at the 'Dragon' for the present?"

But David, in his cool, efficient way, announced that he had a special licence in his pocket, and meant to take his own Becky to his own bosom that very day, or the next, a proceeding indignantly scouted by that young woman.

She declared he was just the old David, selfish, masterful, careless, sure of himself (and her), a young man who

would want a lot of snubbing to be kept in his proper place.

"By keeping 'em off, you keeps 'em on," said David; "but I'm not as patient as Kelmersdale. Where is he now?"

"Hew has disappointed me," said Becky, and sighed. For that January two years ago had been his Ides of March, and he had taken its untoward events so poignantly to heart, that he had been dangerously ill for some months, and came out of that illness an old, embittered man.

He could not blame Becky for Feo's unexpected death, but a corroding hatred of David's youth and good fortune filled his heart. He had broken down when it came to the point of wishing to see her happy with Moray, and even if the latter still remained an absentee, self-respect forbade Hew ever coming forward again as a suitor while the other lived.

And sometimes Becky would write kind little letters to Hew in Paris, where he lived entirely now, for she had a very real affection for the man who had broadened her mind, and opened up new avenues of sympathy and thought; but it was not her friendship, but herself that he wanted, and the unselfishness that had once marked his love for her had entirely disappeared.

"Billy is all right," said Becky, reviving; "he is sliding painlessly into matrimony without any preliminary birth-pangs of love with a charming girl who has long admired him as a curio, and loved him as a man. Only his perennial look of freshness is gone—his very eyeglass has moulted,

and I shouldn't wonder if he ends by becoming that terrible thing, the Apostle of the Obvious!"

There came a sudden interruption, as a small, jealous hand tugged violently at the arms round Becky, trying to loosen them, and she sat up, pushing the dark cloud of curly hair out of her blue eyes, quite abashed at the majestic displeasure with which little Féo was regarding her dishevelment.

"Féo," she stammered, "this is daddy—your wonderful man, you know—come from Africa to see his little girl, and tell her all about the beasties!"

"*This* little girl," said David, frowning; and holding Becky fast, then he looked closer at the child, and paled a little, for Féo had renewed all her humble claim on him in those tiny features.

And little Féo, looking back at her father, smiled, because his eyes were kind, and in such points children are never mistaken, and suddenly she clambered up into his lap, and securing herself against danger by clutching Becky's neck hard with one velvet arm, demanded of him a story.

But David, after a second long, searching look into the little face out of which her mother spoke, and pleaded all her deathless, enduring love, passionately kissed, then set the child down abruptly, walking away to a distance, and Becky, after pacifying, and sending Féo back to the house, came to his side, and passed her hand through his arm.

In that hour she came to know him better than she had ever done before, got a glimpse of the sensitiveness,

the sweetness of disposition he had hidden under a cold and reticent exterior. . . . here was the tender heart his mother had always claimed for him, here too were the highly strung nerves that made him suffer, and enjoy so keenly . . . it was no wonder Féo had loved him, *she* knew him best, that he was not really selfish or hard . . . only his self-control was so great that none knew what he felt—this was a new David, with a nature finer, nobler far than Becky's own.

Long and earnestly they looked at one another, these two who through bitter renunciation and much pain had come to a true understanding, and the little drop of hardness that had cankered and desolated her heart, welled slowly out of it, making her a better, if not a truer woman.

"Dear," she said softly, as he drew her into his arms, "*she* loved us, and we loved *her*. Now we will love one another, and her child."

Rejoice, west wind, for these two who hold all spring in their hearts; grant a benediction, O! earth-mother, on this pair who step gaily out together on life's highway as lovers, friends, and comrades, for they have loved you always, and will be your true children to the end.

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